# The New Criterion

October 1993

A monthly review *edited by Hilton Kramer*

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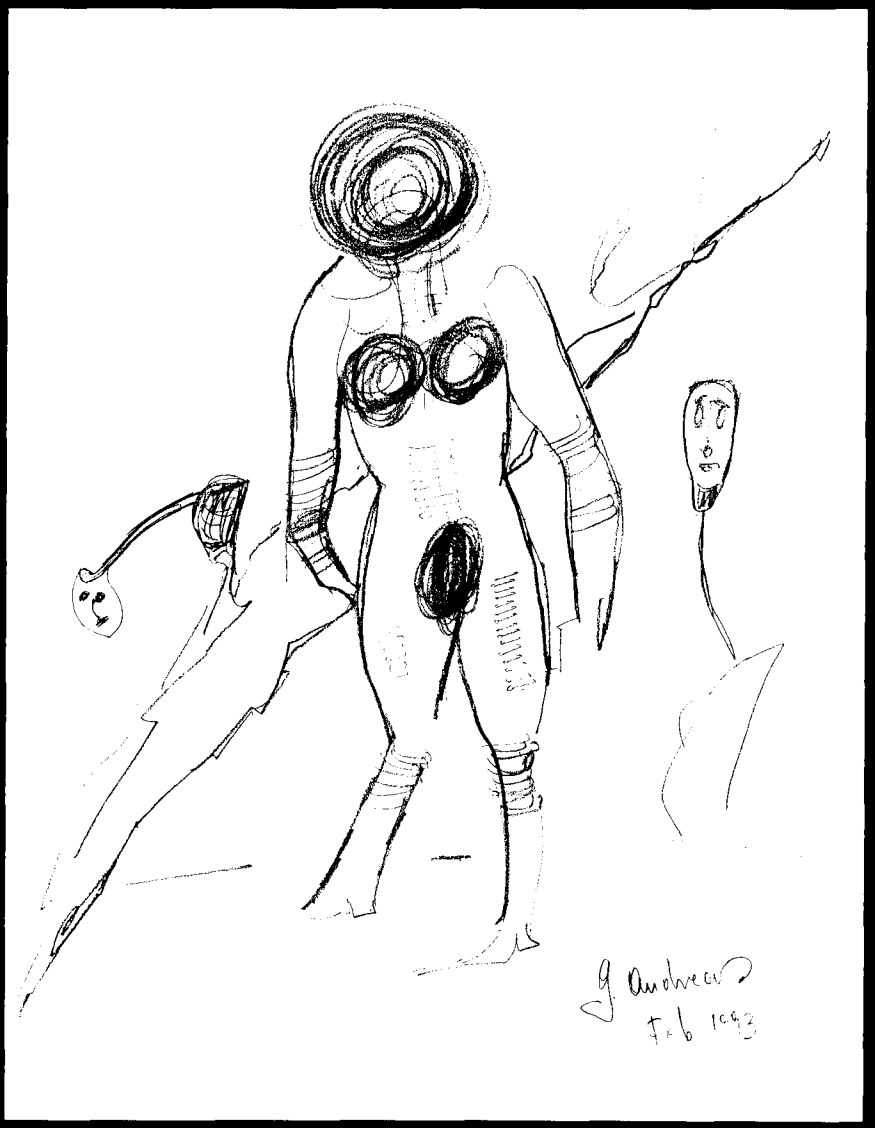


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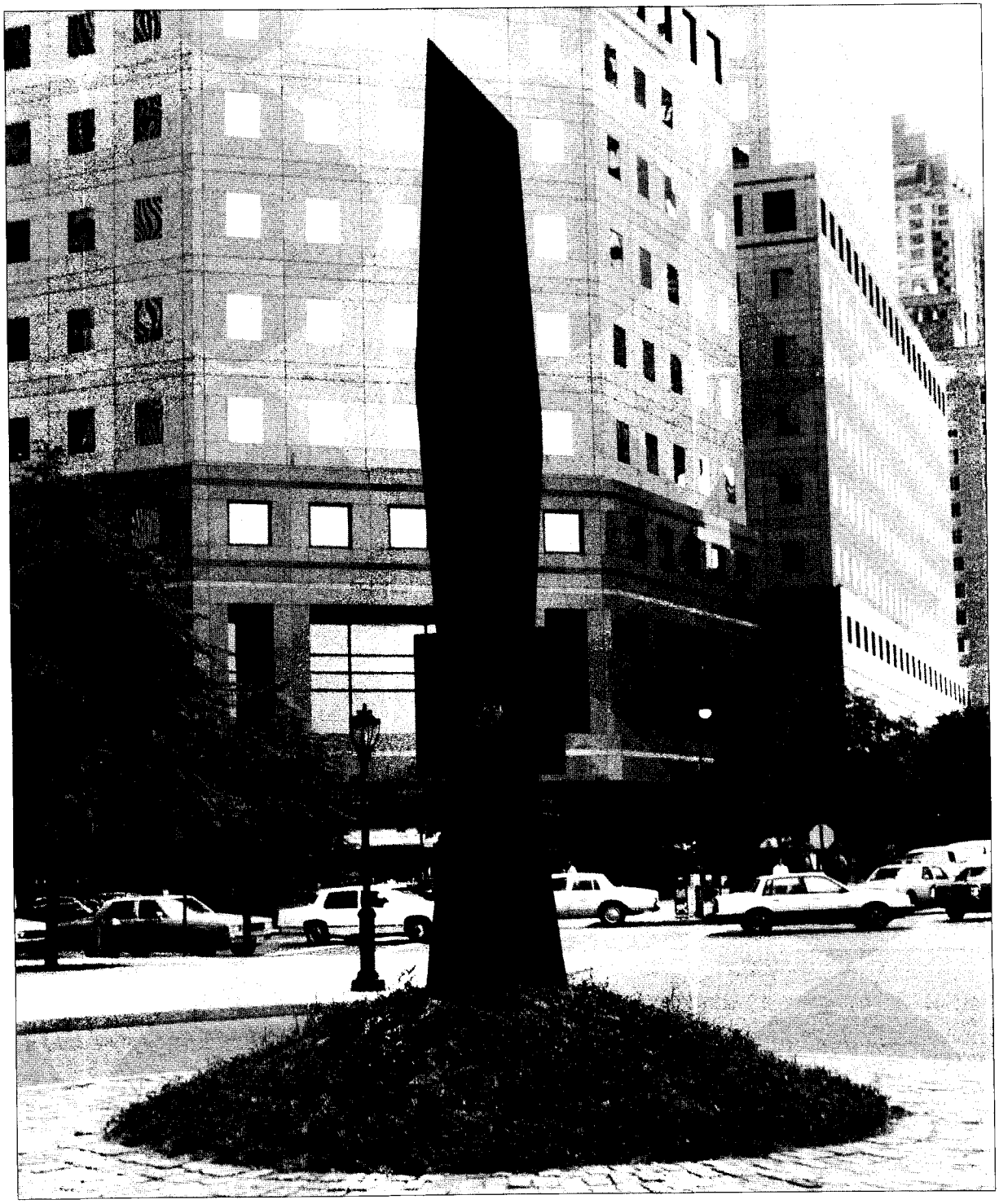

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# The New Criterion *October 1993*

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Of the selections from Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, "Izaak Walton" and "The Eighteenth Century" were first published in *Letteratura inglese, Vol. 1: Dalle origini al Settecento* (1990). All other selections are from *Letteratura inglese, Vol. 2: L'Ottocento e il Novecento* (1991). Copyright © 1990, 1991 by Arnoldo Mondadori Editore SpA, Milan. English translation Copyright © 1993 by Stephen Sartarelli. Published by arrangement with Mondadori/A.M.E. Publishing Ltd., New York.

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# Notes & Comments: October 1993

## *Never apologize, never explain: "The New York Review" at 30*

This month marks the thirtieth anniversary of the founding of *The New York Review of Books*, and to mark the occasion the journal has published an appropriately titled *First Anthology* drawn from its pages (345 pages, $27.50). From its very first issue, the *Review* has been the voice of the Left-liberal establishment in this country. Hence it was to be expected that its anthology would be crammed with certain famous names, and the editors have not disappointed us in this regard. Hannah Arendt, W. H. Auden, Isaiah Berlin, Joseph Brodsky, Bruce Chatwin, Joan Didion, Richard Ellmann, Robert Hughes, Robert Lowell, Dwight Macdonald, V. S. Pritchett, Susan Sontag, Igor Stravinsky, Gore Vidal—these are the names, and the kind of names, that we have come to expect in *The New York Review*, and in this respect, at least, this *First Anthology* accurately represents the fetching combination of high seriousness, intellectual celebrity, middlebrow journalism, and "progressive" social commentary that has been the cynosure of the paper's success from the outset.

Several other things about this commemorative anthology are worth noting, however, for they, too, accurately represent both the spirit of *The New York Review* and the role it has played in American cultural life since the 1960s. The first is the almost total absence of writers who owe their reputation to the existence of *The New York Review*. Surely it tells us something significant about this distinguished journal that of the twenty-three writers the editors have selected to represent its first three decades, only one—the late Jonathan Lieberson—may be said to have made his reputation in the pages of this review. All the others came to *The New York Review* as established names—names that in some cases had been established decades before the *Review* was created.

*The First Anthology* thus confirms the widely shared impression of a journal whose editors have harbored a distinct disinclination, if not an outright aversion, to the cultivation of new and untried talent. This is, of course, one of the things it means to be the voice of the establishment, yet even by establishment standards *The New York Review* has remained remarkably indifferent to the recruitment of younger contributors. Compare the first thirty years of *Partisan Review*, for example, with those of *The New York Review*, and you see the difference between a journal eager to search out new voices and one that was created to be the voice of established opinion. You see, too, the extent to which *The New York Review* has been dependent on the first thirty years of *Partisan Review* for its own pool of talent.



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The second thing to be noted about *The First Anthology* is its omission, for the most part, of the kind of political writing that set the polemical tone and the ideological temperature of *The New York Review* from the assassination of President Kennedy right through to the election of President Clinton thirty years later. There is no trace here of the hard-Left fire-and-brimstone sermonizing of, among others, Noam Chomsky, I. F. Stone, and Andrew Kopkind, whose contributions did so much to define the radical stance of the *Review* and make it indeed the principal organ of radical-chic politics. (Needless to say, there is no reminder here of the infamous diagram published by the *Review* to instruct its readers in the making of Molotov cocktails.) There is no trace, either, of the reportage from Vietnam by Bernard Fall, Jean Lacouture, Mary McCarthy, and others that did so much to shape intellectual attitudes toward the Vietnam War. Of those writers, only Jean Lacouture had the grace to renounce his morally compromised coverage of the war in the face of the Communist victory—an act of political repentance that none of his American counterparts has ever seen fit to emulate. It has been left to two writers who were entirely marginal to the *Review*'s treatment of the Vietnam War—Dwight Macdonald and the Vietnamese poet Thich Nhat Hanh—to represent, or misrepresent, this crucial chapter of the journal's history. In a culture like ours, which every day grows more and more amnesiac about its own recent past, this revision of the historical record is tantamount to a falsification.

The third thing to be remarked of in *The First Anthology* is the disappearance of all but one of the illustrious British dons who have dominated the pages of *The New York Review* during the entire course of its history, lending it both intellectual distinction and a certain air of snobbery. There is no trace here of Baron Dacre of Glanton (Hugh Trevor-Roper), Lord Annan (Noel Annan), Sir Freddy Ayer, Sir Ernst Gombrich, Sir Lawrence Gowing, Sir Stuart Hampshire, Sir John Pope-Hennessy, Baron Solly Zuckerman, and a good many other British academic eminences who have shaped the discussion of history, art history, and so much else in the *Review*. This very large component of the journal's own history is represented in *The First Anthology* by a single contribution—Sir Isaiah Berlin's much-reprinted essay on Alexander Herzen. This, too, must be accounted as a revision of the historical record.

Finally, in contrast to those already noted, still another conspicuous omission from *The First Anthology* does indeed faithfully represent the record of the *Review*, and that is in its coverage of the arts. Simply stated, *The New York Review* has tended to observe a discreet and almost unbroken silence about what was happening in and to the arts in the tumultuous decades since its founding. About the past, it has often published some brilliant essays, and that side of the record is given token representation in this anthology by John Richardson's expert essay on Picasso, Pierre Boulez's discussion of Mahler, Robert Craft's "interview" with Stravinsky on Beethoven, and, on a somewhat lower level, Gabriele Annan's piece on Marlene Dietrich. But the sole contribution here that addresses the arts as they have developed since the founding of the *Review* thirty years ago is Robert Hughes's "The Rise of Andy Warhol"—a salutary put-down of a large cultural phenomenon, to be sure, but hardly a substitute for a critical assessment of the period under review.

For thirty years *The New York Review of Books* has been something of a bellwether of the intellectual Left in this country, yet something about its politics—and it has always been a fiercely political paper—seems to have been deliberately scuttled or denied on this anniversary occasion. *The First Anthology* is a handsome reminder of the high order of criticism and reflection that has often made the *Review* mandatory reading even for those who dissent from its political disposition. Yet



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about that disposition, which has been its guiding light, it neither apologizes nor explains. Perhaps this, too, is what it now means to be the voice of established opinion.

## Ethical *obligations?*

The unmannerly comedy of academia continues. We direct our readers' attention to the September issue of *Harper's* magazine, which features a forum on the subject of "New Rules About Sex on Campus." The rules in question concern sexual relations between faculty and students. Should such relations be banned? Once upon a time, of course, this would have been considered a bootless question. Rules weren't necessary: it was simply accepted that teachers shouldn't sleep with their students. Sure, it happened: sometimes for good, more often for ill. But the general presumption was that a teacher's authority over a student made sexual involvement imprudent at best, morally compromising at worst. In the age of the PC-police, this discreet, commonsensical approach is under attack. Indeed, the feminist-inspired hysteria over "sexual harassment" has led several colleges to consider instituting some sort of formal prohibition on amorous entanglements between students and faculty. Jack Hitt, a contributing editor of *Harper's*, discussed the issue with four academics who are opposed to any such ban: Joan Blythe, associate professor of English at the University of Kentucky; John Boswell, professor of history at Yale; Leon Botstein, president of Bard College; and William Kerrigan, professor of English and director of the program on psychoanalytic studies at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst.

The hero of the piece is without doubt Mr. Botstein. We say this with some surprise, frankly, since our previous encounters with this college president, scholar, musician, conductor, and cultural impresario tended to confirm the opinion voiced by the critic Tim Page, who once wrote that Leon Botstein was the sort of pretentious chap who gave pseudo-intellectuality a bad name. But on this panel Mr. Botstein emerged as a model of sanity. Near the beginning of the exchange, he pointed out that, although he opposed an official ban, he had to admit that sexual relations between students and teachers were problematic. "There *is* a power differential in the relationship between a student and his or her teacher," he said. "And a sexual relationship between a teacher and a student is, in fact, at odds with the task of teaching. Before we start nailing our opponents as puritans, hypocrites, or idiots, let's realize that we're dealing in murky definitions that could cause problems in the conduct of teacher-student relationships."

Yes, it sounds good. But some of Mr. Botstein's interlocutors were having none of it. Here's Mr. Kerrigan: "Prudery is a great offense against life. Without a sex act, none of us would be here. And whenever civilization sets out a law against a sexual practice or expression, it invariably produces a desire to break that law. That's the way eroticism works." How many *non sequiturs*, logical fallacies, and plain mis-statements can be crammed into four short sentences? Mr. Kerrigan must have come near the record. But this farrago was really only a warm-up for his sexual credo. Any parent with a daughter at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, will want to attend carefully to Mr. Kerrigan's idea of pedagogical propriety. He begins by modestly informing us that he has been the subject (he means "object," but never mind) of advances by male and female students for twenty-five years. The males he declines, apparently, but the females are another matter. "There is," he said,

> a kind of student I've come across in my career who was working through something that only a professor could help her with. I'm talking about a female student who, for one reason or another, has unnaturally prolonged her virginity. Maybe there's a strong father, maybe there's



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> a religious background. And if she loses that virginity with a man who is not a teacher, she's going to marry that man, boom. And I don't think the marriage is going to be very good.

What arrogance! Who is Mr. Kerrigan to decide whether his students' virginity is "unnaturally prolonged"? Besotted with a clutch of shop-worn Freudianisms, he assumes that "a strong father" and "a religious background" are dreadful psychological impediments, to be dispensed with as soon as possible. But what if his students do not happen to regard their familial attachments or their religious convictions in this light? Mr. Kerrigan presents the behavior of an academic sexual predator as a new form of altruism: only a teacher, you understand, can save these innocent charges from actually marrying the first man they sleep with—as if that constituted some terrible fate. Mr. Botstein again intervened with reason, noting his "sense of relief" that Mr. Kerrigan was "not on the faculty at my college." He also took exception to the idea that having sex with one's students was somehow a novel exercise of virtue.

Parents of students at the University of Massachussets, Amherst, are not the only ones who should be alarmed. Miss Blythe demonstrated that those who have children at the University of Kentucky have plenty to worry about, too. Mr. Kerrigan betrayed himself as that most common, most pathetic type of seducer—what one might call a garden-variety rake—the type who abuses his experience and position of authority in order to inveigle young women into his bed. Similarly, Miss Blythe shows herself to be a garden-variety academic immoralist, chock-a-block with the stale clichés of last year's radicalism: those who support a ban on sexual relations between students and faculty, she said, "are people who fear real life, especially the protean power of lust. College life for them is about *isolation* from the real world, not an introduction to it." Not only that, but, Miss Blythe insisted, "Most students at eighteen know more about sex than their own parents." Would it follow that an eighteen-year-old child of Miss Blythe's would know more about sex than she? She doesn't say. But why, parents might wonder, should they help to employ such pedagogues as Miss Blythe?

It was at this point that Mr. Botstein began to show signs of exasperation. "Do we share some residual partial allegiance to the idea that passion and reason are in some sense at odds?" he pleaded. Miss Blythe: "No." Mr. Kerrigan: "No, sir." Mr. Hitt chimed in with the suggestion that "Maybe the only thing we have in common . . . is our genitals." Mr. Botstein admitted that he was getting depressed. He is not the only one. There has been much scrutiny and criticism of academic life—moral, social, and intellectual—in the media recently. Typically, the response from the academy has been: "Don't worry, all the criticism has been mounted by bigots or ignoramuses who don't appreciate the exciting and worthwhile things we do with your twenty-odd-thousand dollars a year." This dispiriting forum in *Harper's* gives us a glimpse behind the scenes. Once again, things turn out to be far worse than one had imagined. Just how bad was summed up in the following exchange:

> BOTSTEIN: Let me say this: I think sexual relations trigger a set of ethical obligations.
> BLYTHE: Ethical obligations?
> BOTSTEIN: Ethical obligations.
> KERRIGAN: *Ethical* obligations?

Poor boobies, they haven't got a clue. We might very well question the advisability of instituting bans on relations between students and faculty. A ban on "teachers" like Mr. Kerrigan and Miss Blythe, however, seems far less objectionable.

## *Viewing the libretto*

It came as something of a shock to find in *The New York Times* of August 20 that the



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Metropolitan Opera had decided to surrender its long-held position against supertitles—the projection, on a screen suspended from the proscenium arch, of the words being sung, either in translation (if the operas are being produced in a foreign language) or in the original English. The Met's titles, unlike everyone else's, are to be displayed on television screens mounted on the back of each seat, with each screen shaded in such a way as not to be visible except to the person sitting before it. Just how far this system has been developed is anyone's guess, but the principle of titles has been granted, and their eventual use is certain.

Cultural bastions are falling pretty regularly these days, and the Met's attempt to preserve the integrity of its presentation against the intrusion of words that are meant to be seen rather than heard was a welcome example of artistic courage. The argument against supertitles, of course, is that they distract audiences from the music and the stage action: that at best they require the audience to look away from the opera frequently, and at worst they provide a continuing source of fascination that becomes, like watching television, something complete in itself.

The argument for supertitles, equally obviously, is that they enable the audience to get the gist of the libretto, and thus to participate more fully in the opera. It would seem that supertitles have been responsible for at least some of the surge over the past decade in opera attendance, and may well have brought an entirely new audience into opera houses across the country. Larger audiences mean more money; they also provide administrators and patrons alike with the gratifying feeling that they are filling a need other than simply presenting beautiful operas beautifully.

The reason for the Met's long holdout on supertitles appears to have been music director James Levine's adamant opposition. The *Times* quotes him as saying, in 1985: "Over my dead body will they show these things at this house. I cannot imagine not wanting the audience riveted on the performers at every moment." But Mr. Levine is still alive, and there now will be titles at the Met.

What caused the Met to capitulate? The main reason is attendance. The 1992-93 season was disappointing at the box office. In the September issue of *Opera News*, Bruce Crawford, the Met's powerful president, said that "[t]itles are . . . a mechanism for encouraging opera-lovers to try new experiences . . . If the Met isn't going to restrict itself to the 'greatest hits' repertory, titles may be a necessity." But Mr. Crawford clearly has in mind more than their use in out-of-the-way works: a bit later in the same article he remarks that "limited use for non-mainstream repertory undoubtedly would lead to general use. A decision to employ them for some operas inevitably means they will be utilized for all operas. So be it."

But there is a deeper set of reasons for the Met's capitulation. Even the august Metropolitan Opera has been forced to accept that in the current cultural world the better part of its audience—and perhaps almost all of the new audience—comes to see theater, not to hear music or, one is afraid, even the great tunes. Watching theater without understanding the words is naturally inadmissible. And then it is a sad fact that the Met, like opera houses all over the world, can no longer rely on a large and committed cadre of opera lovers who are willing to spend time before performances doing what might be called their homework: learning about the plots and the music so that the work being witnessed, even when it is in a foreign language, will be comprehensible.

So the Met's *démarche* ultimately is to be explained by that same fact of life we see all over cultural (and indeed national) life: the inner decomposition, and non-renewal, of a cultured leadership elite. Many true opera lovers, however, do remain. It is hardly likely that they will rest content with Mr. Crawford's blithe "So be it."



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# Diana Trilling's "Journey"

## *by Hilton Kramer*

*Why can't incompatible things be left incompatible? If you make an omelette out of a hen's egg, a plover's, and an ostrich's, you won't have a grand amalgam or unification of hen and plover and ostrich into something we may call "oviparity." You'll have that formless object, an omelette.*

—D. H. Lawrence, in *Etruscan Places*

To the literature of reminiscence that has been devoted to the history of the New York intellectuals from their emergence as anti-Stalinists in the late 1930s to the period of breakup and recrimination in the 1960s, women writers have contributed remarkably little. Mary McCarthy, after writing a savage lampoon of the group in *The Oasis* while it was still ascendant in the 1940s, might have been expected to give the subject a full-dress treatment, but she returned to it too late in life to produce anything of significance. The slight, unfinished *Intellectual Memoirs* published after her death added nothing but a self-serving gloss to what she had already written. Hannah Arendt no doubt thought the subject beneath her consideration, though there are bound to be some caustic references to it in her letters—especially in her correspondence with McCarthy. Elizabeth Hardwick has not yet favored us with a candid account of her close involvement with this intellectual circle. It has thus been left to Diana Trilling to provide us with the most extensive memoir of this milieu that has yet been written by a woman who was both a witness to and a participant in its literary and political affairs.

Yet the book that Mrs. Trilling has now written in *The Beginning of the Journey* is, if not exactly peripheral to the history of this literary circle, only partly an account of its intellectual vicissitudes.[1] In much larger part, it is a book about the troubled private life of its author. While its subtitle—"The Marriage of Diana and Lionel Trilling"—gives the reader fair warning as to the principal focus of the book, it nonetheless comes as something of a shock to discover that *The Beginning of the Journey* has much more to tell us about Mrs. Trilling's harrowing and protracted immersion in the mystifications of psychoanalysis than about the public role that she and her husband played in the political and cultural life of their time. As intellectual history, *The Beginning of the Journey* adds little to what we already know about the personal character and political proclivities of the New York intellectuals. It settles a few scores and corrects some minor misconceptions, mainly about the Trillings, and that is about all there is in the way of revising the record. But about another important aspect of New York intellectual life in the period in question—its fateful attachment to Freudian doctrine and the culture of psychoanalysis—Mrs. Trilling has given us a

1 *The Beginning of the Journey: The Marriage of Diana and Lionel Trilling*, by Diana Trilling; Harcourt Brace, 442 pages, $24.95.



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document of undeniable historical interest. Much of her book is indeed a grim illustration of those lines from W. H. Auden's "In Memory of Sigmund Freud" (1939), which once summarized the spirit of the age:

*If often he was wrong and at times absurd,*
*To us he is no more a person*
*Now but a whole climate of opinion*

*Under whom we conduct our different lives.*

It is not only in what she writes about the details of her own horrific experience with psychoanalysis and that of her husband, moreover, that Mrs. Trilling gives a radical priority to Freud over every other means of coming to terms with her life and times. As we follow the course of a narrative that encompasses the many lives that have shaped her own, we come to realize that for Mrs. Trilling—and perhaps for Lionel Trilling, too—the Freudian psychoanalytical enterprise came to constitute a politics as well as a psychology, and even at times a moral system. Its morality was an inverted Puritanism that conferred upon the most extreme varieties of self-revelation and self-vindication the status of an absolute ethical imperative. In the politics of Freudian analysis, villainy was unequivocally identified with the disabling impostures of the bourgeois family. We come to see that it may well have been this view of the bourgeois family that commended Freudian analysis to intellectuals of Mrs. Trilling's generation in the wake of their disenchantment with Marxism. The discovery, in the midst of that disenchantment, that salvation might be accomplished on the couch rather than on the barricades, proved to have an irresistible appeal. Now the path to enlightenment and emancipation required not a plunge into the problematic future but a prolonged exhumation of the past, where the primal causes of our present afflictions were believed to lay buried under the disfiguring fictions of a dishonest society suddenly reduced to the dimensions of the family romance. On the couch, Marxian class conflict was transformed into a contest with parents, siblings, and spouses, while the bourgeois enemy remained firmly in place as the obstacle to be surmounted.

To the rigors of the mystical system of trial and redemption Mrs. Trilling gave up a good many years of her life, doggedly pursuing its chimerical promise of transfiguring revelation through the embattled decades of the Depression, the Second World War, and the Cold War. In the course of this long ordeal, which by her own account brought Mrs. Trilling neither happiness nor any sense of having been "cured" of the fears that afflicted her, she was obliged to endure a good deal of ignorant treatment, if not indeed what we should now characterize as medical malpractice. "In my search for cure," she writes, "I nevertheless went from doctor to doctor, seven in all over the years, and today, at the end of this long road, I still feel that I was never properly analyzed." Three of her doctors died while she was in treatment with them. One, who came highly recommended by the Psychoanalytic Society, turned out to be a drug addict. Another, as she says, was "a Communist fellow-traveler" at a time when both Diana and Lionel Trilling had already become staunch anti-Stalinists. Amazingly, Lionel Trilling also became a patient of the same doctor, with whose family the Trillings even spent a summer holiday lest their psychoanalytical sessions suffer some irreparable interruption. "Today I ask myself," Mrs. Trilling writes, "whether it was possible that Lionel and I were ever so ignorant of the analytical conventions and of the delicate relation between patient and therapist that we cooperated in such destructive arrangements. The answer is that we were precisely this ignorant, and so was everyone we knew"—including, apparently, the psychoanalysts.

That there was a large element of blind and irrational faith in this surrender to the psychoanalytical enterprise is more or less acknowledged by Mrs. Trilling herself. "Freudian thought excited strong emotions among intellectuals," she writes, "but not much intellection. Intellectuals tended, in-



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deed, to voice their opinion of analysis in the language of religion: one 'believed' or did not 'believe' in it." Mrs. Trilling, who is in all other respects opposed to the religious outlook on life, remained a true believer in this particular cult, and appears to remain so even now. She acknowledges, too, that "a disquieting subtext of my experience of analysis was my failure to trust my own judgment of these people into whose hands I put myself. . . . In fact, I never had entire confidence in any of the therapeutic situations in which I found myself. Yet I never left any of them of my own accord. Instead of looking upon my doctors as technicians whom I hired to perform a necessary service and whom I should dismiss if the service was not satisfactory, I behaved with each one of them as if he or she were indispensable to my well-being."

Mrs. Trilling also had reason to believe that one of the several analysts who treated her husband was actively engaged in demonizing her role in his life, and thus attempting to destroy their marriage. One of her own analysts—perhaps the only one she actually admired—made an unwelcome and, for that matter, quite unprofessional attempt to alter the way Mrs. Trilling conducted her career as a critic.

> More than once [Mrs. Trilling writes], Dr. Kris said of my literary criticism that I must "neutralize" it, by which she meant that in my writing as in my life I must be more accepting, less given to the making of judgments; as a critic, I was to be less critical. . . . But in commenting on my work in these terms, Dr. Kris was not just expressing a biased sexual view; she was moving into an arena in which she had little competence—psychoanalytical training is not a preparation for literary judgment.

Yet in the face of these blatantly moralistic interventions in her life, Mrs. Trilling continued to affirm her interest in, as she puts it, "psychoanalysis as a medical practice." In this regard, she makes what she regards as an important distinction between her attitude toward Freud and that of her husband.

> Until the end of his life, Lionel never yielded in his admiration for Freud. But it was Freud the man of idea, Freud the witness to the tragedy of civilization, whom he esteemed. He was not primarily concerned, as I was and continue to be, with psychoanalysis as a medical practice.

Yet on his deathbed, as Mrs. Trilling duly reports, her husband received the last rites, so to speak, during a final session with *his* psychoanalyst, a woman whom Mrs. Trilling was meeting for the first time. "They saw each other in private," Mrs. Trilling reports, "but when she was ready to leave I took her to the door. I had never before met Dr. Abbate, but at the door she leaned over and kissed me. She said that she wanted me to know how much Lionel had always loved me. It was not something which she had to say, nor was it much to say, but it was enough." Clearly for secular intellectuals of the Trillings' generation, psychoanalysis was something more than "a medical practice."

It was ironic, in any case, for a psychoanalyst to have advised Mrs. Trilling to "neutralize" her penchant for criticism, whether in regard to literature or about life itself, for Freudian analysis is nothing if not a system that compels its acolytes to render the fiercest judgments on those nearest and dearest to them. In this practice, too, Mrs. Trilling exhibits all the unlovely stigmata of the classic analysand. She delivers herself of harsh verdicts and ungenerous characterizations about members of her own family, about members of her husband's family, about many of the people who figured importantly in their professional lives, and even, alas, about her beloved husband himself. It is indeed one of the sadnesses of this book that so much of it is devoted to what may be called a psychoanalytical deconstruction of Lionel Trilling's character.

Armed with the moral authority of the Freudian system, Mrs. Trilling has made it one of the tasks of *The Beginning of the Journey* to demystify her husband's reputation —not as a critic, to be sure, but as a man!



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"I very much disliked the image of Lionel as someone immune to profanation," she writes. "I felt that it lessened and falsified him. I preferred him in all his vulnerable humanity." Mrs. Trilling holds it very much against her husband that, unlike herself, he did not wish to publicize his own need of psychoanalysis or otherwise disclose the problems of his private life to his students, his academic colleagues, or his literary friends. It is clearly beyond her comprehension that such discretion may signify a command of moral delicacy to be admired. What particularly incenses Mrs. Trilling is that her husband did not disabuse his students of their high opinion of him. Lionel Trilling, she charges, "had a public image to protect, perhaps especially at Columbia," and she cannot forgive his reluctance to deface that image through the agency of abject public confession.

> Lionel represented for his gifted students a literary academic whose thought ranged well beyond the academy, linking literature to the wider political and moral life of the nation. The social relevance and moral intensity which in our American mid-century gave criticism its newly important role in society made Lionel himself into a kind of moral exemplar for his students, someone whose life and character might set the pattern for their own public and private choices. Lionel did not create or encourage this image. Consciously he scorned it. Yet unconsciously he conspired in it.

"Obviously I cannot write about Lionel's analytical history with the direct knowledge which I bring to my own," Mrs. Trilling writes, but this professed disability does nothing to lessen her determination to pursue her project of profanation with a single-minded fervor. She thus offers a peevish and detailed guide to her husband's "vulnerable humanity." This includes, among much else, disparaging descriptions of what are said to be Lionel Trilling's characteristic ways of conducting himself while swimming in the ocean, playing tennis, driving a car, and partnering his wife on the dance floor. Mercifully, we are spared an account of his performance in bed, but we are certainly meant to understand that Lionel Trilling could make little claim to distinction in the realm of masculine prowess. He is even criticized for sleeping less soundly after the birth of their son than when they lived together without parental responsibilities—criticized, that is, for making himself more readily available to respond to the baby's needs in the middle of the night. This must surely be counted as one of the most bizarre indictments in the checkered annals of modern marriage. By the same token, he is criticized for sleeping *too* soundly earlier on in their marriage when, by Mrs. Trilling's own account, her husband was exhausting himself with an overload of teaching and writing in order to support his parents, who were impoverished by the Depression, while his troubled wife frittered away a small legacy from her father on a fruitless pursuit of Freudian nirvana.

On matters small and large Mrs. Trilling compiles her indictment of her husband's offenses quite as if he were the principal malefactor in her life. If Lionel Trilling was disinclined to carry out the garbage, though by no means averse to serving his wife breakfast in bed, this was another matter that had to be subjected to psychoanalytical scrutiny. And if he had the courage to disagree with his wife in describing Whittaker Chambers as "a man of honor," this must be dismissed by Mrs. Trilling as "a careless phrase"—which is a truly preposterous observation considering the gravity of the occasion. Lionel Trilling knew very well what this carefully considered defense of Chambers would cost his reputation, and he was willing to pay the price. It does nothing but trivialize her husband's own honor to treat this matter, as Mrs. Trilling does, as if it were an example of thoughtless composition. The really awful thing about the portrait of Lionel Trilling that emerges from *The Beginning of the Journey* is that Mrs. Trilling's unassailable faith in the ethos and efficacy of the psychoanalytical enterprise shields her from the least glimmer of understanding the



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moral violence she has inflicted upon the memory of the man she clearly adored. In this respect, as in others, Mrs. Trilling has indeed performed something of a feat in *The Beginning of the Journey* by incongruously combining an orthodox Freudian reading of her life with the kind of feminist politics that are generally thought to be opposed to Freudian theory.

It is one of the many paradoxes of this book that while its author is very much concerned to exonerate her husband and herself from the charges brought against them by other members of their New York intellectual circle—that they were too square, too bourgeois, too genteel, and insufficiently Jewish in their public identity—Mrs. Trilling has herself provided the public with a far more devastating account of their lives in all of these respects than anything written by Delmore Schwartz, Alfred Kazin, Harold Rosenberg, and the other critics who ridiculed their manners, their politics, their respective literary styles, and the reputations they achieved. About the Trillings' inadequate finances, especially in the 1930s when Lionel Trilling undertook to support his parents, Mrs. Trilling complains a good deal. Never mind that a good deal of cash was flowing into the coffers of a succession of psychoanalysts. Suddenly in this narrative of straitened circumstances in hard times we find the Trillings installed in a garden apartment on the Upper East Side of Manhattan with a housekeeper in attendance in the midst of the Depression. Still, Mrs. Trilling complains that her husband never had a proper study in which to work. (She was not yet a writer herself.) Even now, she doesn't seem to understand that by the measures of the time her overworked husband did pretty well in providing her with a respectable standard of living. Yet because she had been brought up in wealthier circumstances—a West End Avenue style of luxury she professed to scorn—nothing that Lionel Trilling earned was ever enough in her view. One can only conclude that with Mrs. Trilling in charge of defending the family name, there was never any need for critics like Alfred Kazin and Delmore Schwartz to call the Trillings to account. Mrs. Trilling has exceeded their indictment on every charge.

Yet for all the criticism of Lionel Trilling that fills the pages of *The Beginning of the Journey*, Mrs. Trilling duly acknowledges that she owes her career as a writer to the man she married.

> Before I met Lionel [she writes], I never thought of myself as a putative intellectual. I was not even acquainted with the word in this honorific use. Himself an intellectual, Lionel shared the attitudes and tools of the intellectual trade with me. Without him, I would no doubt have remained just another half-educated product of an expensive schooling. From Lionel, I learned not only what to read but also how to think about what I read. He gave me a literary and critical vocabulary and prepared the path to what eventually became my career.

And further:

> With marriage I had entered Lionel's world; it was with his friends that I now chiefly associated. My career as a critic still lay in the future but unconsciously I may have been preparing for it. They were not easy companions, these intellectuals I was now getting to know. They were overbearing and arrogant, excessively competitive; they lacked magnanimity and often they lacked common courtesy. But they were intellectually energetic and—this particularly attracted me—they were proof against cant.

Except for this last point—for both Freudian theory and feminist ideology have engendered whole new realms of cant that are reflected in this book—Mrs. Trilling can be said to have mastered the intellectual style here described. With its arrogance, its fierce competitiveness, its lack of magnanimity, and its utter indifference to questions of moral delicacy, *The Beginning of the Journey* at last qualifies its author for full membership in this illustrious intellectual circle. She learned its lessons well.



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# Sex in the twilight zone: Catharine MacKinnon's crusade

## *by Roger Kimball*

*Speaking about pornography is not like anything else. It is crazier. . . . It makes grown men cry and smart people stupid.*
—Catharine MacKinnon, *Feminism Unmodified*

*Every idea is an incitement.*
—Oliver Wendell Holmes

The demand for excessive freedom is a curious thing. Beginning in wholesale rebellion against restraint, it soon sets about erecting its own restraints—often harsher and more irrational than those it intended to replace. What was meant to shatter the bonds of convention and establish liberty ends up forging a new set of tyrannous conventions, all the more noxious for being imposed in the name of freedom.

The latest access of sexual liberation is a case in point. Born in the 1960s, the movement for sexual liberation has followed a predictable trajectory. It started in naïve abandon—chanting "Down with monogamy, emotional commitment," etc.—and proceeded quickly through shock, disillusionment, bitterness, and rage. Herbert Marcuse, Norman O. Brown, and a thousand lesser gurus foretold the sensual paradise awaiting those who were bold enough to dispense with the repressive trappings of bourgeois morality. (And bourgeois politics: it is remarkable how regularly prophets of sexual revolution have fused, or confused, sex and radical politics.)

By the mid-Seventies, though, the prophets were grumbling. The sexual utopia they had envisioned was, literally, no place. Nature itself was part of the problem. A battery of new sexually transmitted ailments, from herpes to AIDS, arrived in quick succession to make casual sex a dangerous, potentially a deadly affair. Nor was disease the whole story. For one thing, most people found the pursuit of sexual gratification for its own sake ultimately ungratifying. They were looking for sex without strings. It turned out that "the strings"—the emotional and spiritual nourishment that longstanding relationships offer—were essential: sever them and the pleasure chills.

So much was a salutary corrective to the excesses of the Sixties and Seventies. But true to form, the demand for sexual liberation has also spawned a counter-movement, an ideologically motivated demand for sexual orthodoxy. This shows itself above all in what we might call the sexual-harassment industry: the fantastical reinterpretation of everyday life such that every human exchange is potentially open to the charge of sexual malfeasance. Of course, there are genuine instances of sexual harassment, when an employer or a teacher or even a family member or friend takes unfair sexual advantage of someone. In the course of things, such cases are rare, which indeed is one reason we continue to be shocked when they come to light. But the sexual-harassment industry universalizes these instances. Largely an expression of the rancorous side



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of feminism, it is a perfect specimen of political correctness in action: yet another case of the euphoric Sixties suffering from a hangover. As usual, comic elements abound. Connoisseurs of bunk owe the folks at Smith College a great deal for the insistence that "lookism"—the "prejudice" that some people are more physically attractive than others—is a form of "oppression" that will not be tolerated on their campus. Only slightly less splendid is the notice posted at the University of Wisconsin warning that men had been caught "staring" at women in the library and urging those who had been "victimized" in this way to report malefactors to the police. Such examples could be multiplied indefinitely. Most are absurd; not all are so funny, as the spectacle of Anita Hill testifying against Clarence Thomas on national television reminded us.

The restrictiveness and intrusiveness of the sexual-harassment industry have led some to describe it as a "new puritanism." In fact, it is a new marriage of radicalism and intolerance. In this sense, it represents the underside of the movement for sexual liberation: sharing crucial goals and assumptions but differing over questions of implemention and method. Far from signaling a return to traditional sexual scruples (as some commentators have suggested), the sexual-harassment industry is really a kind of guerrilla arm of feminism. Male sexuality and "patriarchy" are the ostensible targets. But this campaign for sexual redress is ultimately directed against nature itself. How inconsiderate and illiberal of nature to have created human beings male and female! Let us therefore attempt to remedy this imposition by legislating it out of existence.

If this characterization seems extreme, consider the work of Catharine A. MacKinnon, perhaps the most articulate and influential representative of what one writer has dubbed "feminist fundamentalism." A tenured professor at the University of Michigan Law School, Professor MacKinnon is the author of *Feminism Unmodified* (1987), a collection of essays about what a rotten time women have had of it, and *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (1989), an elaborate effort to demonstrate that the law is sexist—or, if that seems too blunt, that the state participates "in the sexual politics of male dominance by enforcing its epistemology through law." Together with the activist Andrea Dworkin (to whom *Feminism Unmodified* is dedicated), Professor MacKinnon has labored long on the frontiers of a certain species of feminist radicalism. The two women cultivate very different personae. Professor MacKinnon is poised and comely, conservatively, almost primly, dressed and meticulously made-up, her nails gleaming and hair piled high in calculated disorder. Andrea Dworkin is, well, the opposite. But both come bearing the same message. It is a short tape, yet it plays on an endless loop. Miss Dworkin sums it up when she writes that in contemporary America (which—it is one of her charms—she spells "Amerika") "rape is the paradigmatic sexual act." An alarming claim. But no more alarming than the argument, vigorously put forward by Professor MacKinnon and Miss Dworkin, that pornography itself is a form of rape. Accordingly, both argue that pornography should not be protected under the First Amendment. ("First Amendment absolutism" is for both a term of contempt.) On the contrary, they insist that, as an instance of discrimination against women, pornography should be actionable under the Fourteenth Amendment (the "equal protection" amendment) as a violation of civil rights. They have even drafted a model ordinance for the city of Indianapolis outlawing "the graphic sexually explicit subordination of women through pictures and/or words."

Until recently, Miss Dworkin and Professor MacKinnon have been largely cult interests. But Professor MacKinnon has lately emerged as an important academic celebrity. Last spring, *The New York Times Magazine* and *New York* both ran cover stories on her. After all, it is not every day that you find an attractive female law professor obsessed with pornography and arguing against the First Amendment. There are also some gossipy



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tidbits. One piquant detail is that Professor MacKinnon is engaged to be married to Jeffrey Masson, the renegade psychoanalyst whom Janet Malcolm wrote about in *The New Yorker* a few years back. Among other claims to notoriety, Mr. Masson admits to having slept with nearly a thousand women. This is not generally the sort of thing to win a feminist's heart, but Mr. Masson has apparently mended his ways. It may also help that he considers his fiancée "the greatest mind at work in the world today." Living with Professor MacKinnon is "like living with God," he told readers of *New York*. "She just sits and thinks deep thoughts."

The latest digest of Professor MacKinnon's deep thoughts is to be found in a slim volume entitled *Only Words*.[1] Originally presented in April 1992 as the Christian Gauss Memorial Lectures in Criticism at Princeton University, *Only Words* is by and large a recapitulation of arguments Professor MacKinnon had made in previous books. But its brevity gives it a special punch—much as distillation produces a more potent, not to say more toxic, brew. The book is remarkable on several counts. In the first place, it is remarkable that an exercise in feminist legal apologetics should have been delivered as the Gauss lectures. Established in the late 1940s, this distinguished series was conceived primarily as a forum for new work in criticism and aesthetics. (The comprehensive listing supplied by Princeton is headed "The Princeton Seminars in Literary Criticism.") There have been some exceptions—Hannah Arendt on Karl Marx, for example—but the dominant focus of the Gauss seminars has until recently been literary or literary-critical. Previous Gauss lecturers include such eminent writers and critics as Erich Auerbach, Francis Fergusson, René Wellek, Robert Fitzgerald, Randall Jarrell, Edmund Wilson, Rosemond Tuve, W. H. Auden, and Lionel Trilling. It tells us a great deal about the state of the humanities in the academy today that someone with Catharine MacKinnon's radical views should have been deemed appropriate for this honor.

*Only Words* is also remarkable in its tenor. The book is a philippic against pornography. Yet it contains many graphic passages sure to bring a blush to the cheek of a young person. Professor MacKinnon displays an uncommonly expert acquaintance with the varieties of pornographic experience, assuring us, for example, that she has done "five years of research on the making of pornography in cults and white supremacist organizations." Her thundering denunciations, delivered from the pulpit of feminist self-righteousness, remind one of an old-time preacher's invocation of hellfire and brimstone: How terrible pornography is! How degrading that women should be depicted in this way! Let me give you all the shocking details. . . . Other opponents of pornography might conclude that to some extent *Only Words* is an example of what it condemns.

Professor MacKinnon's argument rests on the observation that some speech is not only speech but is also a kind of action. The law has long recognized this, which is why it enforces oaths and certain oral contracts and provides remedies for libel, slander, etc. When we say "I do" at the altar or shout "Fire!" in a crowded theater, we do not express an opinion but commit an action. Professor MacKinnon's contention is that pornography, far from being "only words" (or pictures), is also a form of behavior. "What pornography does it does in the real world, not only in the mind." And again: "To say it is to do it, and to do it is to say it. It is also to do the harm of it and to exacerbate harms surrounding it." It is this dubious equation that licenses her claim that "protecting pornography means protecting sexual abuse *as* speech" and, further, allows her to call for legal sanctions against pornography. It is a short step from here to Professor MacKinnon's claim that "there is no way to prohibit rape if pornography is protected."

Professor MacKinnon can be a diligent scholar; and no doubt the case law she cites raises challenging questions for specialists

1 *Only Words*, by Catharine A. MacKinnon; Harvard University Press, 152 pages, $14.95.



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interested in the tension between the First and the Fourteenth Amendments (a tension that in this context might be described as the conflict between the demand for individual freedom and the promotion of group rights). But all her scholarship is in the service of an obsession. Thus it is that *Only Words*, like Professor MacKinnon's other books, proceeds on two levels. On the one hand, we find a clever theorist spinning ingenious arguments about the ways in which pornography is more act than speech and hence qualifies as a species of discriminatory behavior. On the other hand, we encounter an impassioned ideologue in the grip of an *idée fixe*. The latter keeps breaking through the text of the former, undercutting her credibility. This shows itself particularly in Professor MacKinnon's tendency to treat her central categories as infinitely elastic metaphors. In *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*, for example, she writes that "women are raped by guns, age, white supremacy, the state—only derivatively by the penis."

Hmmm. One wonders whether victims of such "derivative" rape would agree. It's partly a case of the little girl crying wolf. The problem is that rape—what we might be forgiven for calling "real rape"—gets lost in the blanket indictment. The same is true of Andrea Dworkin's identification of rape as the "paradigmatic" sexual act. Professor MacKinnon and Miss Dworkin want to declare the entire world a disaster area. This makes it impossible for them to discriminate between genuine emergencies and business as usual. (They will tell you that "business as usual" *is* the emergency: but that of course is the rub.) It is difficult not to conclude that that little tinkle one hears while reading Professor MacKinnon's books is the rattling of a loose screw. Consider her remark, in *Feminism Unmodified*, that for the previous five years (this was 1984) she had spent two hours a night, five nights a week, studying martial arts as "a physical, spiritual, and political activity." A cheering thought, that! And then there is her complaint that "sexual intercourse" is "still the most common cause of pregnancy." Still? Even now?

According to Professor MacKinnon, pornography is to blame for all manner of social calamity. Indeed, it sometimes seems that she regards it as a kind of latter-day Original Sin—with Adam, not Eve, proffering the forbidden fruit. In her mind, the power of pornography is preternaturally formidable: "its power *is* the power of the State," she exclaims. No image of brutality is extreme enough to capture the evil of pornography. In one place she likens it to the Holocaust. And in a recent PBS television interview about her book, Professor MacKinnon even implicated pornography in the rape and slaughter now sweeping Bosnia. In the former Yugoslavia, she explained on the "Charlie Rose Show," pornography was even more prevalent than it is in the United States. (And America, she says repeatedly, is a society "saturated" with pornography.) It was just this—the ubiquity of pornography—that "created a population of men preprimed sexually to enjoy inflicting torture." Pornography, she concluded, created an army "just waiting to commit a genocide."

What's wrong with this picture? For one thing, Professor MacKinnon assumes a breathtakingly simplistic and reductive view of human behavior. Men she regards with contempt: "the ultimate male bond," she says, is "between pimp and john." Not only are men heartless exploiters, they are also dangerous automata: one whiff of pornography and they are irretrievably set on the path toward rape: "Sooner or later, in one way or another, the consumers want to live out the pornography further in three dimensions." One sometimes gets the sense that what really enrages Professor MacKinnon is the ungovernable fact of sexual desire itself. "Men define women as sexual beings," she notes with distaste. What effrontery! In Professor MacKinnon, we have a modern Lady Macbeth, calling on the gods to unsex her—and everyone else, too.

As it happens, Professor MacKinnon's attitude toward women is hardly more encouraging. Of course, her declared goal is equality—between the sexes first of all, but also between classes, races, etc. (She is yet



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another tenured professor opposed to "hierarchy.") But if women are the feckless, supine creatures that Professor MacKinnon conjures up, then equality is no more than a chimera. "You hear the cameras clicking or whirring as you are being hurt," she writes. "You learn that language does not belong to you, that you cannot use it to say what you know. . . . You learn that your reality subsists somewhere beneath the socially real—totally exposed but invisible, screaming yet inaudible. . . . You learn that speech is not what you say but what your abusers do to you."

Who is the "you" in this nightmare scenario? Women—abused and "silenced" by a society that tolerates pornography. Professor MacKinnon is endlessly loquacious about the "silence" of women. And their helplessness. For her, women never have any choice about whether to become prostitutes; they never freely choose to act in pornographic films; they never display a prurient interest in pornography. The London *Sunday Telegraph* recently ran a story about a woman-run brothel in Germany that supplies women for women. Not wonderful, perhaps. But in Professor MacKinnon's victimology it should be impossible: Women are used and abused by men, not by other women.

The absurdity of this view of women has been adroitly exposed in *The Morning After*,[2] Katie Roiphe's recent book about the sexual-harassment industry. Miss Roiphe is quite right that Professor MacKinnon's attack on pornography is a "potent mixture of mysticism and legalistic logic" that "infantalizes" women. "The image that emerges from feminist preoccupation with rape and sexual harassment," she notes, "is that of women as victims, offended by a professor's dirty joke, verbally pressured into sex by peers." Are women so fragile, so much in need of protection? Miss Roiphe reminds us that we have every reason to doubt it. She also takes issue with Professor MacKinnon's "monkey-see-monkey-do" model of male behavior according to which pornography "causes" men to become perverts. Is looking at dirty pictures really so dangerous?

Currently a graduate student at Princeton, Miss Roiphe is only in her mid-twenties. Yet her book, which focuses largely on her undergraduate years at Harvard, displays more common sense (not to mention more humor) about relations between the sexes than all of Professor MacKinnon's dour lucubrations. For Professor MacKinnon, if a man whistles at a woman, it is a crisis of sexual harassment. No doubt the whistler acts in bad taste. Perhaps his attentions are unwanted and make the woman feel uncomfortable. Should his whistling be proscribed? Miss Roiphe's comment is a breath of fresh air: "although it may infringe on the right to comfort, unwanted sexual attention is part of nature. To find wanted sexual attention, you have to give and receive a certain amount of unwanted sexual attention." Professor MacKinnon seems not to have figured out this elementary fact of courtship yet.

Given her attack on feminist fundamentalism, it is worth noting that Miss Roiphe identifies herself as a feminist. But she is what one might call a red-blooded feminist: bright and impatient with the anemic fantasy according to which an evil male conspiracy has systematically subjugated the frail female throughout history. The testimony of her own experience tells her how distorted this view is; her observation of its effects on her peers shows how damaging to the real interests of women it can be. Miss Roiphe had occasion to sit through the lecture version of *Only Words*. During the question period she asked about Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*: is it, too, a form of pornography? Most readers will be surprised to discover that, according to Professor MacKinnon, *Lolita* is really about "the tragedy of child abuse." Tinkle, tinkle, tinkle: would that we had Nabokov's rejoinder to that one.

It should go without saying that one does not have to subscribe to Professor MacKinnon's absolutist stand on pornography in order to conclude that it is a social ill. Even in its milder forms, pornography tends to

2 *The Morning After: Sex, Fear, and Feminism on Campus*, by Katie Roiphe; Little, Brown, 180 pages, $19.95.



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depersonalize sex. And as a substitute for genuine human connectedness, it is narcissistic and dehumanizing. In this sense, pornography may be said to harm men, its primary consumers, even more than women, its chief subject. It is also true that in its hardcore varieties pornography is basically sexualized psychopathology. We are told that pornography is a $10 billion-a-year industry—larger than the "legitimate" film and record industries combined: a dispiriting statistic, if accurate. About this we can commiserate with Professor MacKinnon. And we can agree with her, too, that the pornographer's insistence on his First Amendment right to publish filth is largely a cynical abuse of his democratic freedom. The Founders struggled mightily to frame a document that would secure political liberty for the citizens of this country. It is grotesque to see their efforts used to justify *Hustler* or *Deep Throat*.

At the same time, it is worth remembering that virtually all advanced societies produce pornography; its partisans call it—or the forms of it they approve of—erotica. Not that the ubiquity of pornography is a reason that its production and circulation should not be restricted in various ways. In most societies, it is: often by indirect social pressure as much as by law. The point is that in a free society, people are legally "allowed" to do many things that we hope they will forbear doing. The limits of permissible behavior are not the same as the limits of desirable behavior. We count on upbringing, education, and socialization to nudge us closer to the latter. Because we value freedom, we grant the latitude to err. It is this that Professor MacKinnon cannot abide. Thus she advocates a sweeping program of censorship that would restrict not only pornography but also "materials that promote inequality." And who do you suppose would be empowered to decide what sort of materials "promote" inequality?

This brings us to what is most radical in Professor MacKinnon's thought. Although pornography is her chief subject, her goal is not simply the eradication of smut. For her, pornography is a metaphor, a crystallization, of social and sexual inequality. Banishing pornography is only one element in a campaign to revolutionize the law and, with it, all of society. Professor MacKinnon concludes her book by calling for "a new model for freedom of expression in which the free speech position no longer supports social dominance, as it does now." A level playing field is not enough: she wants to enforce her own brand of "equality." What she opposes even more than pornography is what she calls "the stupid theory of equality"—the theory, that is, according to which everyone is equal under the law. Because some people are disadvantaged, she argues, they deserve unequal (i.e., preferential) treatment in order to establish "true" equality. Hence she wishes to replace the "abstract rights" guaranteed by the Constitution with a menu of "substantive rights."

What would this mean? The short answer is a new feminist tyranny. Professor MacKinnon expatiates at the end of *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State*: "The main question would be: does a practice participate in the subordination of women to men, or is it no part of it? Whether statutes are sex specific or gender neutral would not be as important as whether they work to end or reinforce male supremacy, . . . When it is most ruthlessly neutral, [the law] is male; when it is most sex blind, it is most blind to the sex of the standard being applied. When it most closely conforms to precedent, to 'facts,' to legislative intent, it most closely enforces socially male norms." In other words, fair is foul, foul is fair.

Professor MacKinnon tells us that she looks forward to the imposition of a "nondominant authority." This marvelous Orwellian oxymoron—even she admits that it is currently "unthinkable"—perfectly epitomizes her approach to social policy. Tyranny is necessary to establish freedom, while the rule of law must be broken to make room for a "higher" law. To Catharine Mackinnon, it looks like the promised land. In fact, as this ravaged century has shown repeatedly, it is a recipe for disaster.



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# Balthus presents Balthus

## *by Jed Perl*

The earliest painting in the Balthus retrospective that was at the Musée des Beaux-Arts in Lausanne over the summer dated from 1922, when the artist was fourteen years old.[1] This strikingly precocious composition, in tempera on paper, brings together a knight, an angel, and a horse in a design that has overtones of Piero della Francesca; titled *The Angel's Message to the Knight of Strättligen*, it was a proposal (not accepted) for a decoration for a church at Einigen, on the Lake of Thun. The most recent painting in the show, *The Cat with Mirror III*, is said to have left Balthus's studio only a matter of weeks before the show opened; it is the latest addition to a series of paintings, each depicting a girl seated on a bed playing with a cat, that has been one of Balthus's chief preoccupations since the late 1970s. In between the 1922 work and the 1993 work there were some four dozen paintings and many more dozen drawings and watercolors: landscapes, portraits, a few still lifes, street scenes, and the nudes that have made Balthus not only famous but also notorious. The show, which was organized with the close participation of the artist, who has lived in Switzerland since 1977, was a major retrospective, but casually arranged. Paintings and drawings were mixed in the same galleries—something that is nowadays generally avoided because of concerns about the damage that strong light can cause to works on paper. There were major loans (from New York, the Metropolitan's *Mountain* and the Modern's *Street* and *Joan Miró*; from Paris, the Pompidou's *Artist and His Model*, as well as the *Passage du Commerce Saint-André*, which, although it is in a private collection, is sometimes seen at the Pompidou). Despite the inclusion of so many key works, the show was not exactly a complete overview of the career. One felt that Balthus wanted to linger on his more recent work (as most artists do). The exhibition seemed provisional rather than definitive. This retrospective gave the impression that it was at least in part about Balthus thinking about Balthus.

A very interesting catalogue has been produced to accompany the show, and it makes it perfectly clear that this is much more than one of those summer events with which European cities hope to boost tourism. Balthus has apparently been thinking about Switzerland a good deal of late, and I have no doubt that he encouraged the group of catalogue essays that underline his Swiss connection. Especially significant is Jean Leymarie's essay "Balthus and the Swiss" (Leymarie organized the show in collaboration with the artist and Jörg Zutter of the

1 "Balthus" was on view at the Musée cantonal des Beaux-Arts, Lausanne, Switzerland, from May 29 through August 29, 1993. A French-language catalogue, with essays by Jean Leymarie, Jean Rodolphe de Salis, Jean Starobinski, and Jörg Zutter, has been published by Skira/Musée cantonal des Beaux Arts (120 pages, 50 Swiss francs).



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Musée des Beaux-Arts). Balthus was born in Paris, and his painting, from beginning to end, is quintessentially French in the way that realist, romantic, and classical tendencies are commingled so that each somehow modifies the others. But considering that there is an element of the non-Parisian in every great School of Paris artist—this element can be Spanish, Italian, Burgundian, Norman, Provençal—there is no surprise in the fact that Switzerland has played so critical a role in the formation of Balthus's art. Balthus lived in Switzerland when he was a child, he was there during World War II (from 1942 to 1946), and he has now apparently decided that it will be his final home. His first wife, Rose Alice Antoinette de Watteville, was from Bern; they were married there in 1937; his portrait of her in a traditional Bernese hat is in the Wadsworth Atheneum. *The Mountain*—regarded by many as one of Balthus's finest works—depicts an Alpine walking tour; and a number of elements in the early portraits are based on the figure paintings of the eighteenth-century Swiss painter Joseph Reinhardt, whose work Balthus copied in the museum in Bern. The Swiss connection goes deep, and in reading Leymarie's essay one begins to see the extent to which Switzerland has functioned for Balthus as a safe haven whose significance is at times artistic even before it is political. Balthus is not the only artist for whom Switzerland has had this kind of significance. This is a country to which one can retreat in order to gain some distance on the artistic upheavals that are going on in the great European centers. And that perspective can, in turn, help an artist to find his own direction. Among the figures whom Balthus associates with Switzerland is the poet Rilke. Balthus's mother, Baladine, was involved with the poet, and Rilke became a mentor to the adolescent boy. Later on, during World War II, it was in Geneva that Balthus became fast friends with Giacometti. Balthus has long and complex connections with Bern, a city that has been at one time or another home to a number of key twentieth-century figures. It was in Bern that Einstein developed the Special Theory of Relativity, and it was to Bern that Paul Klee, who was born in Switzerland but spent most of his life in Germany, returned during the war years, did his last work, and died while still awaiting word on whether he would be granted Swiss citizenship. (One day, Balthus and Giacometti were supposed to go and visit Klee, but they got so involved in talking to each other that they missed the appointment.)

I think that in encouraging the presentation of this exhibition in Lausanne Balthus means to reframe his reputation within the Swiss context. Seen from this perspective, Balthus looks like neither the firebrand who shocked Thirties Paris with erotica nor the aloof cultural diplomat who was director of the French Academy in Rome in the Sixties and Seventies. To see the art of Balthus in Lausanne is to see the art of a reasonable man, a man who is determined to present a serene picture of what has been a very complicated career. Perhaps, in fact, Balthus wants us to think of Swiss neutrality as a metaphor for his own position in relation to his seemingly unresolvable reputation. Balthus's work has always inspired fierce reactions, pro and con. Even those who admire Balthus for his achievements in draftsmanship and composition are often uncomfortable with the startling libidinousness of some of his subject matter. And among people who believe that art is nothing if it is not confessional, Balthus is dismissed because he presents his confessions with such apparently disinterested elegance. Balthus's paintings, early and late, raise nearly unanswerable questions about the tangled relations of art, eroticism, and pornography. Decades before the art historians had been heard from, this artist's studies of very young girls kicked off a debate about the politics of the gaze. And now, at the still center of all the controversy, Balthus declares his neutrality. He is saying that he is, at least by inclination, Swiss.

The appearance of a new Balthus painting is a relatively rare event, so the 1993 painting in



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Lausanne, an addition to the series of paintings of a girl confronting a cat on a bed, was something to see. It is in places darker than the earlier versions, but in other places it is brighter. All in all, it presents a rich, jewel-like effect. Perhaps because the blonde girl is dressed in a sort of medieval outfit (it is a little like the outfit that the knight wears in the earliest work in the show), the painting has a gentle, storybook quality. In her tunic and pants, this girl has the softly androgynous look that one associates with a time in childhood when physical beauty is not yet exactly divided along masculine and feminine lines. Like so many Balthus paintings, this one is notable not only for its virtuosity in figure drawing and paint handling but perhaps even more so for its audacious simplifications and challenging distortions. The whole lower part of the body is presented brusquely, almost diagrammatically; it has the reduced and angular quality of a figure on a Romanesque tympanum.

From beginning to end the retrospective underlined Balthus's prodigious gifts, and his reluctance to depend on them. Nothing is natural in his painting, neither the Biedermeier darkness of the work of the Thirties nor the Turkish decorativeness of the work of the Fifties. This dazzling eclecticism is the key to Balthus's modernity. He knows the values of conscientiousness and calculation—he knows that an artist can take nothing for granted, at least not now—but he knows the limits of calculation, too. Balthus can occasionally be slick and even banal, but every painting is different, which is a testament to the artist's liberating restlessness. He adopts different manners and styles—Trecento, Quattrocento, Japanese, Courbet. But he is only interested in style as a starting point, and his tradition-consciousness is guided by an unpredictable, self-critical, sensuous intelligence. He is a virtuoso of the figure and of a variety of styles, but he refuses to depend on his virtuosity. This show was full of figures and faces in which Balthus seemed to be seeing how little he could do with—how little of his virtuosity needed to be brought into play. His work is often imperfect, but by the time a viewer has begun to see what exactly the problems are, he's been taken to places where very few painters can go. Balthus finds structures and then loses himself in them. Balthus flies in the face of the modern improvisational method, which is to move from uncertainty to certainty. He goes from certainty to uncertainty.

A number of paintings that were exhibited in Lausanne were unfamiliar, even to viewers who have seen most of the major Balthus shows of recent years. A portrait of the photographer Martin Hürlimann in his study, painted in 1929 when Balthus was twenty-one, is dark, forceful, somewhat in the manner of the later Vuillard portraits. The group portrait of the Cassandre-Mouron family, from 1935, is one of those delightful pictures in which Balthus squeezes nineteenth-century genre painting for its Surrealist undertones. The people here are like extraordinarily bright, smart, amusing toys. The portrait of the Baroness Alain de Rothschild, from 1958, is this century's most important attempt at a society portrait. Balthus's subject here is the charm of monied elegance. It was Ingres's subject (he also painted a Rothschild) and it is perhaps in an effort to keep his distance from Ingres that Balthus has given his painting a sketchlike informality. *The Artist and His Model*, never seen in America and too rarely shown at the Pompidou in Paris, is one of the greatest of Balthus's designs, though the face of the girl who leafs through the album struck me, at least this time around, as perhaps a bit underdeveloped. There were two curious late still lifes, neither major: a basket of cherries, dated 1956-61, is audacious in its stark symmetry and yet somehow dull; another composition, from 1982, this one with a glass and a piece of bread, contains a beautifully painted basket, but in general is too severely flattened out. Of the paintings of the 1980s, three of a young girl (all the same model) were included on one wall in the second-to-last room. *Nude with Cloth* (1981-82), with the girl holding a blue cloth in her right hand and her left arm raised above her head, has a quality of compression



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that makes it the best standing figure that Balthus has done in a quarter century. The other standing figure I found somewhat dull. And the 1983-86 *Nude With Guitar* is also a miss (it is, along with a number of other recent paintings, reproduced in the 1990 edition of the Balthus book published by Skira/Rizzoli). I think that the analogy between the girl's torso and the guitar resting beside her is overly obvious—pornographic, banal. In these paintings, Balthus seems a little too deep into his infatuation with this young girl; these paintings left me feeling not so much uneasy as nonplused. But it is worth noting that this artist will still risk going erotically overboard at eighty. And the new painting of the blonde girl with the cat is without a doubt a return to strength, which in Balthus's case generally means that sex appeal is presented as but one facet of a picture's magic.

While the Lausanne show was not a balanced chronological view of the career, it was very much a show that became, even as one went through it, an addition to the artist's biography. The brilliance of the installation was a sure sign that the artist had been involved. Paintings were hung so that they took the light beautifully. And the new painting was given a sneakily dramatic presentation that I cannot imagine was dreamed up by anybody but Balthus. Rather than hang it at the end of a series of galleries where it would be visible from earlier rooms, Balthus hung it in such a way that one only saw it once one had walked all the way into the last room and turned around. The effect was of a prize withheld, and this is absolutely Balthusian. Like most artists who have been famous for much of their working lives, Balthus is acutely aware of the power of presentation. He knows that the public's response to the work is often shaped by the context in which the work is seen and even by what the public knows of the artist's career. Balthus is a master at making the audience see him in what he believes to be a flattering light. For many years he counted on his position in the upper reaches of fashionable artistic Europe to give his career a legendary allure; beyond that he basically kept the greatest possible distance from his public. In the Sixties, when John Russell was involved in preparing a Balthus retrospective at the Tate Gallery, he requested some biographical information from the artist and received in response the following telegram. "No biographical details. Begin: Balthus is a painter of whom nothing is known. Now let us look at the pictures. Regards. B." But apparently Balthus has begun to change his attitude toward biographical disclosure. This artist who would almost never consent to be interviewed has given quite a few interviews for publication in recent years; he spoke with *Newsweek* on the occasion of the Lausanne show. For the Lausanne catalogue, Balthus has obviously decided that biographical information is in order. The essay by his close friend Jean Leymarie is packed with information; and this from a writer who, when he composed the introduction to the Rizzoli monograph in 1979, observed that Balthus "keeps to himself the facts of his private life, around which floats a halo of legend." The 1979 book didn't even mention the year of Balthus's birth. Leymarie is a historian and curator who has never been sufficiently known or appreciated in the United States; but he is surely one of our best guides to the mind of the School of Paris, and his essay in the Lausanne catalogue, full of biographical information, is the clearest possible indication that Balthus is now bidding us think about his past in a new way.

Balthus is eighty-five—a fact that he is no doubt well aware of, in spite of his having been born on February 29, leap day, and therefore having only a few years ago invited friends to a twentieth-birthday celebration. I imagine that there are several explanations for Balthus's new interest in letting his audience in on his life story. It is perfectly natural that a man who is past eighty will be more concerned with how his life is understood by posterity than a man who's in his fifties or sixties. It is known that Balthus was unhappy with the catalogue essay that



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Sabine Rewald wrote for the Metropolitan Museum show of 1984, and he may have concluded that the best way to counter what he regards as misinformation is to allow his close friends to provide interpretations that he finds more congenial. There is also the fact that Balthus's longtime friend and dealer, Pierre Matisse, has passed away, robbing him of an individual who carefully guarded his reputation for half a century. But there could be another factor, more complex and personal, at work as well. For a long time Balthus may have felt that too much discussion of his early years—when his parents, who were minor figures in the artistic life of France and Germany, brought him into close contact with some of the greatest writers and artists of the day—would overshadow his own accomplishments. Balthus's father, Erich Klossowski, was a painter, stage designer, and art historian (he wrote an important book about Daumier). His mother, Baladine, was also a painter. When Balthus and his brother (the novelist and artist Pierre Klossowski) were young, their parents went their separate ways, and Baladine entered into a passionate relationship with Rilke (their correspondence is famous). Bonnard was a family friend, and gave Balthus early criticism and encouragement. Rilke wrote the introduction to Balthus's cycle of ink drawings about a cat, *Mitsou*, that was published in 1921; Rilke also raised money for the boys' education and dedicated a poem, "Narcissus," to Balthus. That is not all. In the early Twenties, first Pierre and then Balthus were sent to Paris to stay with Gide, who had heard about the boys from their father and is said to have found in the young Klossowskis inspiration for certain elements in *The Counterfeiters*. This is quite a childhood. And now, having himself lived quite a life, Balthus may at last feel that the time has come to tie the beginning and the end together and suggest that Rilke and Bonnard, his earliest admirers, were not wrong.

Balthus is our contemporary: a working artist whose new paintings are eagerly awaited. But the sources of his strength are hidden way back, in a European culture that had practically disappeared long before World War II. By insisting on his early history, Balthus is now insisting that we see his work in this deep, historical perspective. Bonnard, Rilke, and Gide, the three great artists with whom he came in contact in his youth, were all products of the Symbolist world of the 1890s, with its love of legend, emblem, metaphor, and mystery. That was where they began, and they never entirely left those interests behind, but in the years when Balthus was young—the years before, during, and after World War I—each of these artists was transformed by the forces that were transforming Europe, and the romanticism of their early work was burned away, leaving something harder, clearer, greater. Rilke wrote his masterpiece, *The Duino Elegies*, between 1912 and 1922, the last six elegies at Muzot in Switzerland, in a house that he'd never have lived in had it not been for Baladine, who was instrumental in arranging for the rental and making the house livable. Gide's masterpiece, *The Counterfeiters*, another work with a Balthusian connection, was published in 1926. And Bonnard only became a painter of the first order as the Twenties were turning into the Thirties, and he settled in the South of France and traded his beguiling Parisian vignettes for an exploration of the power of incandescent, almost disembodied color. These are the men and the achievements that influenced Balthus in his youth and early manhood, and once this has been taken into account our often ambiguous relations with his work become easier to understand. For decades now Balthus has been both hailed as the proof that a return to realism is possible and damned as the last academician, but both his admirers and his critics are generally incapable of distinguishing between cause and effect. Balthus's wide culture, easy erudition, and sense of rootedness within tradition are counted among his major achievements when in fact they are merely his points of departure. Balthus's audience confuses ends with means, and his means



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becomes their ends. Thus an artist who has never stopped breaking the rules can be mistaken for an artist who wants only to impose a new set of rules.

Balthus has sometimes been criticized and even occasionally ridiculed for calling himself Count Balthazar Klossowski de Rola; opinions differ as to whether his father's Polish family was actually entitled to the title, but in any event it does seem a bit absurd for an artist of his stature to care one way or the other. This isn't the only Old World title that Balthus seems to feel suits him. This painter of cats has referred to himself as the King of the Cats; it's the title of one of his self-portraits. All the preoccupation with titles may actually go back to his parents, who named him Balthazar—one of the Three Magi. But when one considers that three great men (Bonnard, Rilke, and Gide) visited and admired Balthus in his youth, the royal and aristocratic titles don't seem quite so absurd. Baladine Klossowski, a bohemian moving from city to city (she died in Paris in 1969), may have rarely known where the next month's rent was coming from, but she brought her boys up amidst the only royalty that she believed the modern world could offer, the royalty of genius. If Balthus does not seem to live by the ordinary rules, this is because he was born among people to whom those rules quite simply did not apply. It was Rilke who advised him always to call himself Balthus—a childhood nickname. And it is surely in an effort to remain in that royal kingdom of art which was his birthright that he has regarded life as a fairy tale, complete with lovers who will never grow up. It cannot trouble Balthus that he's been criticized for enjoying high society. He has before him the example of Rilke, who was criticized on precisely those grounds and then sat down at his desk one day and, thinking of Picasso's *Saltimbanques*, wrote as beautifully as anybody ever has about the substance and evanescence of man. The truth is that Balthus, like his parents' great friends, has taken nothing for granted. To realize that Rilke and Bonnard, men who were formed in the 1890s, were the first to help Balthus, who is still sending paintings out of his studio in the 1990s, is to see a link between our *fin de siècle* and the *fin de siècle* that invented the idea as we know it. Balthus is not wrong to say that he is only twenty-one years old. In the logic of his art—which is the only logic that ought to concern us—time stands still.



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# Further reflections on English literature

## *by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa*

TRANSLATOR'S NOTE: *The following selections from Lampedusa's* Letteratura inglese, *a series of lectures on English literature delivered, in his Palermo apartment, to a private audience in 1953-54, are for the most part fragments of longer, more continuous discussions. Eschewing of necessity any attempt to represent the text as it stands in the original, I have chosen passages where Lampedusa digresses from the more standard literary-historical material of his lectures. Since this often involved removing passages from their contexts, here and there I was forced to add a word or two for reference, or to elide irrelevant references. Yet rather than burden the present text with brackets around my editorial additions or subtractions (which are in any case minimal and purely functional), I have chosen to incorporate them directly into Lampedusa's text. Likewise the breaks between sections and extra spacing between paragraphs, as well as the section titles, are almost always my own.*

*—Stephen Sartarelli*

### *Izaak Walton*

In London there is a street, St. James's Street, that is almost entirely filled with luxury shops for men. Ties, shoes, polo mallets, and golf clubs adorn the windows of these tiny shops, the quality of whose merchandise has been tested with the same meticulous care as that with which a poet examines the lyrics that might adorn his volume. Stupendous hunting rifles for hunting everything from thrush to elephants; cartridges of every kind, from the very light ones for killing birds without marring their plumage to the triple-sheathed sort for striking down a rhinoceros that has taken a personal dislike to you. Tobaccos of every sort and from every country, from our own crude Tuscan variety to cigars from the Philippines that smell of pineapple, not to mention cigarettes from Turkey, Egypt, Armenia, Afghanistan, Russia, Indochina, Peru, and Australia; cigarettes with tobacco steeped in rose-oil, or cigarettes that after being made have lain in cellars for a year alongside dried cod; cigarettes with saffron, cinnamon, or incense; red cigarettes, black cigarettes, yellow cigarettes; whisky cigarettes and patchouli cigarettes. Briar pipes, meerschaum pipes, amber pipes, ivory pipes, ancient and modern, smooth and carved, round, cubical, tomato-shaped, and pyramidal; straight pipes, pipes curving down and pipes curving up, mouthpieces of every sort, from those made of Manila leaf, which chill the smoke, to those carved from bones of the dead, which chill the soul. Cigarette lighters that run on fluid, gas, electricity, and now, I would imagine, atomic energy; lighters made of gold, silver, platinum, steel, jade, and wood; with spring, rotor, or trip-lever, with Tibetan flint, lighters that stay lit as long as the wind doesn't reach 125 kilometers per hour, lighters with clocks and lighters with compasses, lighters that emit a muffled



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rumble in your pocket to let you know when the fluid is almost out. And what fluids! Colorless, red, green, amaranth, and yellow. Quick-lighting fluids and slow-burning fluids, fluids scented with oregano, with "peau d'Espagne," with Chanel No. 22; and even especially stinky fluids to ward off bothersome people.

Then there are the liqueur shops, the cricket shops, the dog shops. And all very refined and elegant in tone. Even the most sedate man's head begins to spin. The prices are in guineas.

There are also shops of fishing gear. Angling, that is, a most noble and combative sport (they even fish for tuna with hook and line) much practiced in the seas, rivers, lakes, torrents, and streams of England. These shops are overflowing with hooks, rods, lures, lines, reels, kegs, and everything else that man has ever come up with to deceive and destroy those innocent animals. Yet the shop window, modestly draped in ivory-colored velvet, displays only a book, a slender little volume bound in green morocco leather: *The Compleat Angler*, by Izaak Walton.

Izaak Walton (1593-1683) is at once one of the most solid classics of English literature and one of the most widely read authors to this day. In ninety years of living he produced but two small volumes, some six hundred pages in all, yet his fame and consistent popularity are due to the fact that he is the most English of Englishmen: the English type personified. (He's also an excellent stylist.)

He was above all "a scholar and a sportsman":[1] the first of his books is the one on angling, while the other consists of five brief biographies of illustrious men he knew (what he meant by "knowing" these men we shall see below). This duality of skills is an incontrovertible requirement in England, a country where, for example, a Cambridge student who excels in the composition of Greek verse is morally disqualified if such humanistic prowess is not complemented by comparable feats in rowing or boxing.

Walton is *a tripos* in both aptitudes.

(Over Milton there hangs an unmentioned, perhaps unacknowledged, shadow, because his never-to-be-repeated academic triumphs in the ancient languages appear never to have been accompanied by similar successes in sports.)

Aside from this, *The Compleat Angler* is a book full of zest and humor. Mixed in with the most minute explorations of the ways to prepare bait and shorten rods are the most delightful descriptions of rivers and lakes; types of amateur and professional fishermen are described with the most pleasant benevolence; the great drinking bouts in friendly inns after a day's fishing are recounted with a sense of humor worthy of Shakespeare and Dickens; the wiser (and let's admit it, loftier) advice on *fair play*[2] and on equanimity toward rival fishermen and toward the fish themselves (which must always be given a "fighting chance") is dispensed in an unexpectedly solemn tone which gives a sense of how close this all was to Walton's heart. This material has produced the most agreeable, most "Anglican" style imaginable: all understatement, all half-tones, like a Rowley watercolor. One must have a trained palate to grasp how many subtle ingredients have gone into this sauce, which so well accompanies the taste of lake trout or salmon at twilight.

Walton's treatment in his *Lives* is exactly the same. Instead of tench and carp, however, here he is treating men, truly illustrious men such as John Donne and George Herbert. But this makes no difference to Walton: for him they are not great poets; they are "gentlemen and friends," which is much more important. His biography of Donne speaks only of his life as a churchman and his sermons: that he was one of the greatest of English lyric poets is not even hinted. The Life of Herbert speaks engagingly of the way that poet once helped a carter get his cart unstuck from the mud, and how many pairs

1 In English in the original.

2 In English in the original.



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of stockings he used to distribute to the poor of his parish; Walton also seems not to know (or pretends not to know) that Herbert was one of the great religious poets of his day.

Walton, in short, is anti-Plutarch. His is a delightful Englishness, a faithful mirror of that most unusual country, where one can spend weeks in the daily company of an elderly gentleman before learning he is an illustrious admiral or (as happened to me with Lord Haldane) a former viceroy of India.

Walton, of course, is not Shakespeare—he's not Donne or Milton either, and has nothing comparable (in intensity) to Dickens or Browning. Yet if you really want to know the "Englishman" in the pure state, you're better off knowing him than the others.

## *The eighteenth century*

The ideal form for verse satire is the epigram. With more than six lines, a poet succeeds in mocking only himself.

If he weren't so close in time to that other great pessimist, Jonathan Swift, it would not be exaggerating to say that Defoe was the English writer, after Shakespeare, with the most tragic sense of life.

N.B.: This interpretation of Defoe's work is exclusively my own. The critics have remained blind to the tragic content of his work and consider him a pleasant writer, keen-witted and carefree.

All of Swift's writing, like all writing of his time, is polemical. Yet Swift alone manages to raise his personal attacks to a level of universal significance. When Swift inveighs against a mediocre writer or corrupt politician, the reader sees before him not some petty and forgotten individual but all the scoundrels and fools in the world; such is the magic of the style, the breadth of vision, the great and bitter poetry expressed by that sickened brain and broken heart.

We have had occasion more than once to mention the deep-rooted perversity of the eighteenth century. It is much less manifest in England than in France. Not that it's entirely lacking, and the novels give some instances of this. But it never reaches the depths of Sade and Laclos. The great epoch of English perversity is the Restoration; a somewhat lesser period is the Regency, from 1800 to 1825. Generally speaking, however, English perversity is mostly rooted in the lower middle class bordering on the proletariat, where unbelievable things used to happen (and still do). In the literary world it is more of an affectation, a kind of reaction to a forever looming Puritanism. The lewd anecdotes they used to tell me after dinner, after the ladies had withdrawn, had the charming naïveté of jokes told by schoolboys in our country, and in no way compared to the actions (let alone the anecdotes) of the most upright Italian, Frenchman, German, or Russian. Perhaps they were only pulling my leg. But I don't think so; there was too much consistency in too many different details.

## *Wordsworth*

If he had enrolled with the Girondins as he had hoped to do, he probably would have perished during the Terror along with André Chénier; still the difficulty of pronouncing his name would have prevented him from becoming another subject for our operatic stage.

Wordsworth's lines have some of the most beautiful movements, breaks, and rhythms in all of English poetry—all of it, mind you, in a minor key: very subtle harmonies of shade, never the prodigious bursts of light of Byron or Shelley. The full-toned, declamatory line does not exist in his work: it is all a sequence of modulations, a quiet discourse full of secret echoes.



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## *Lord Byron*

Byron is one of those poets (like Tasso, or like Verlaine, whom he doesn't resemble at all) whose life is more important than his works. Symptoms of an age's weariness, flowers of decomposition, their works remain incomprehensible unless one knows the circumstances that gave them birth and in which they took root.

Now that lyric poetry has decided to lay down one of its most potent weapons, satire, we are forced to admit that what our society really needs . . . is a Byron—that is, a poet who is not a slave to the public or to the publishers, a poet with twenty million in unearned income who would dare "appeler un chat un chat et Rolet un fripon."

As for the relationship between Byron and Italian opera, the blame, it must be said, lies rather heavily on the poet's head. I don't know whether the indigestible confections our grandfathers swallowed under the names of *Il Corsaro* and *Marin Faliero* actually came from Lord Byron's kitchen. It matters little, in any case. What is certain is that the various Manricos, Edgardos, and Barnabasses, buffoonish ghosts still wandering about in our midst, are the children of Lara and Conrad. They have their same howling pomposity, their bombastic vacuity. Crying out their aggravation, they deafen our ears with their false loves and false vendettas, dazzle our eyes with their fake beards and fake swords, whereas their fathers, at least, remained silent, closed inside the pages of a book.

## *Shelley*

It would be impossible for you not to have noticed by now that I do not lack sympathy for the English. I am not, however, blind to the many flaws that also form part of their character: one of these is a certain *self-contentment*[3] which, though perhaps justified in more than one way, is quite unjustified in others.

For example, one often comes across English authors who extol England's perennially liberal attitude toward her writers, contrasting this with the persecutions suffered by intellectuals in other countries, especially in czarist Russia. This is usually followed by nasty comments about the political persecution of Pushkin, Lermontov, and Dostoevsky; they cite the most unfounded gossip about the so-called "sham duels" in which the first two poets lost their lives, then repeat the unfortunately true stories about the great novelist's death-sentence and life as a prisoner.

Yet these English intellectuals seem to forget that a few decades earlier England had the good fortune to possess three absolutely first-rate poets, all three of whom had to die in exile, hounded by an uproar of English contempt, from those who did not like Byron's and Shelley's politics, and worse yet, did not approve of Keats's aesthetics. And until forty or so years ago, their memory, especially Shelley's, was still shadowed by a kind of moral reserve, more ridiculous than dangerous.

I still remember how, in my childhood, in the first survey of English literature I ever read, Shelley's name was relegated to a "note" in tiny lettering, among the minor writers.

It must, however, be added that these sorts of persecution are not governmental but social, carried out, that is, by broad strata of English society, who felt stupidly but sincerely indignant. And this redeems somewhat the political aspect of the matter.

## *Keats & Leopardi*

Some have tried to compare Keats to Leopardi. The comparison is unfair to both. Keats never descended as far as the Italian

3 In English in the original.



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poet into the depths of pain—of life, that is; on the other hand, Leopardi does not belong to the class of angels: unlike Keats, he hasn't the dew of paradise on his lips. The only point of contact between these two "supreme" poets is the cult of Classical beauty and the persistent theme of Hellenism. Yet anyone who knows how vague the concept of Classical beauty is and how little the content of a lyric poem really matters cannot help but pay no attention to this connection—a connection which, moreover, both poets often and willingly flee in opposite directions: Leopardi by adding his own sense of anguish, which, perhaps wrongly, is not considered Hellenic; and Keats, propelled by the ever vibrant Celtic depths fermenting in the soul of every English artist, by opening breaches in the walls of the Parthenon through which one may glimpse "perilous seas" and "fairy lands forlorn" as foreign to the Greeks as to the Italian poet.

## *Sir Walter Scott & Italian opera*

Scott is one of the culprits most responsible, even more so than Byron, for the sort of inferior Romanticism from whose manure sprouted the unhealthy mushroom of our well-beloved ***melodramma***.[4] Like crows our librettists descended on those fanciful characters and stripped them of all psychological substance and historical accuracy; they did the opposite of what Scott had achieved, and brought matters back to the arbitrariness and nullity of Radcliffe and d'Arlincourt. Then came the composers, who dressed these mannikins in dulcet or mighty notes, equally horrific.

Thus Edgar, the serious, reserved, respectable Edgar of *The Bride of Lammermoor*, became the black-clad paranoid Edgardo who haunts salons and cemeteries in our *Lucia*.

The opera has tainted everything. So far, only the great works written after its heyday have escaped it. Yet if some evil fate should rejuvenate the genre, rest assured that we shall one day see a baritone, dressed as Monsieur de Charlus, singing "Questo o quello per me pari sono,"[5] and a Mattia Pascal (a tenor, perhaps?) regretting his unreal death with an accompaniment of *contrabbassi*.

Chekhov was recently attacked by the Italian disease, and Tolstoy not long before him.

"Avenge, O Lord, thy slaughtered Saints!"

## *The unclassifiable Robert Burns*

There lived in France, around the mid-seventeenth century, a high magistrate who was also a good writer and a man of taste: le President Des Brosses. For his own pleasure, he sojourned a long time in Rome. Baroque art was at the height of its splendor then, and the architecture of St. Peter's was considered the most beautiful thing in existence. Des Brosses, however, didn't like it. Being also a shy man, and not wishing to attract controversy to himself, he didn't say so. But his intellectual honesty did not allow him to praise what he didn't like. Thus in the great volumes he published after his trip to Italy, he speaks of everything he saw in Rome, from the Campidoglio to the *norcini*;[6] of St. Peter's, however, not a word, as if it had not existed.

I was about to imitate the good Monsieur Des Brosses just now: I didn't want to talk about Burns, but honesty overcame my timidity. A bit late too, since Burns (1759-1796) is a contemporary of Blake, not Byron. But talk of him I will.

There is in England a public that loves true poets; it is more limited than the comparable French public, but broader than the

4 Italian for "opera," used disparagingly by Lampedusa.

5 "It is all the same to me."

6 Pork-butcher shops typical of Rome.



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Italian. After this comes a far more numerous stratum of people who haven't the education but like to read poets because their obscurity gives them the illusion of understanding the Eleusinian mysteries; below this stratum, yet not quite on the level of the Guy Brothby audience, there are countless people, sentimentalists with almost no education, and these go crazy for Robert Burns.

At the same time there is also the whole Scottish public, which, breathlessly searching for a national poet, has fastened onto Burns. This readership is made up of Scottish professors, Scottish journalists, and Scottish intellectuals in general, and their efforts have resulted in giving a seal of "officialness" to the same liking for Burns shared by the less cultured English.

Thus favored by both the large number of low-ranking English admirers and the all-inclusive sweep of Scottish admirers, many of them eminent persons, Burns has officially become a great poet.

He is, in reality, the perfect prototype of the *faux bonhomme*, the writer who affects extreme simplicity, who claims to find the English language too difficult and thus takes refuge in the Scottish dialect. The simple, explicit, lacrymatory lyric, the lyric that all the greats from Shakespeare to Goethe have dealt in as a by-product of their real art, represents Burns's highest achievement.

His horizon is too limited, his interests too narrow. And behind his every invocation of Auld Lang Syne, behind his whiny elegies to little Highlands shepherdesses, one smells the vapors of whisky, object of his immoderate devotion. In short, a provincial poet by destiny, whom a wind of fortune hurled onto higher peaks. In him we see what Giovanni Meli would have become if Sicily's dream of separatism had been realized.

Having said all this, I would now advise you that when in England, let alone Scotland, you should never court a girl without quoting a line or two of Burns for her: the poet's purity intoxicates them to the point where they forget their own personal purity.

In this respect Burns is a poet of great worth.

## *Charles Dickens*

The critics have far from shared the public's favor for Dickens. During the author's life, and to an increasing degree until thirty or so years ago, the most absurd criticisms imaginable were leveled at his art.

It was said that his lack of culture is patent, that one notices immediately that he came from an uncultivated social milieu and that he had no university education. The critics who wished to rise above such colossal idiocies argued that his art would not survive because, on the one hand, it was too closely linked to the social and environmental conditions of his time, and on the other, because his characters do not correspond to real human types but are caricatural abstractions. These last two accusations seem to me a contradiction: if Dickens's characters are pure abstractions, how could they be so overly bound to the author's time, or to any time at all?

It seems to me that these critics, ensnared in their rigid schemas and perhaps even handicapped by their age-old defect of not having closely read the works they are writing about, have got their interpretation of Dickens totally wrong; what I mean is that they are unable to see the essential truth shining through the features of what they call "caricatures," a truth which only enlargement and distortion can render. An artist cannot "typify" without being a little hard on his subject. And if his creation is made in this fashion, of course it will be unlike any persons of our acquaintance; it will, however, contain in itself a truth and durability that other, flesh-and-blood beings do not have. None of us has ever met Don Quixote or Sir John Falstaff on the street, and neither will we ever meet Sam Weller or Micawber; still, every one of us knows small-format reductions of each of these demigods. The common mortal can only possess alabaster reproductions ten centimeters tall; Cervantes, Shakespeare, and Dickens had the authentic *Moses* of Michelangelo in their sitting-rooms. We see only the shadows



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projected on the room's wall; they knew the archetypes.

## *The critics*

As a nation, England has had more than one good fortune; and in her literature, she has had still more. I am well aware that what we are calling "fortune" here is, like everything else, the inevitable consequence of other remote factors, but since the ability to discern these "imponderables" belongs only to the gods, we are better off calling them "fortunes."

One of these felicitous accidents is that the most authoritative English literary criticism has almost always been written by artists. Obviously professional critics, pedants who cling to philosophical theories, pompous archive-diggers, rhabdomantic source-seekers, anatomical text-dissectors exist in England too; but they do not set the standard for artistic taste.

By the same token the literati, the great poets or novelists or essayists, do not remain shut up in their ivory towers, but often put their talents and their acquired experience in the service of criticism; and without any "apparatus" they give us the best possible interpretations of their predecessors and contemporaries.

This tradition of poet-critics is a long one that begins with Ben Jonson and in our day has found an eminent representative in Eliot, having come down to us through such names as Dryden, Coleridge, Lamb, Browning, Swinburne, and Chesterton. It is a very useful tradition that teaches the reading public greater appreciation and above all keeps the literary world from splitting into two enemy camps.

## *Tennyson*

Nowadays Tennyson is not forgotten, of course, but neglected. To our hurried generation his poems seem too long; to our sterility his fecundity appears monstrous. To our generation's ignorance disguised as spontaneity, his vast learning seems artificial; to our thirst for immediate success, the long elaboration of his works seems an affectation. Our sensuality, which finds expression far less often in actions than in words, mistakes his modesty for hypocrisy.

Perhaps the fruit of misunderstanding, probably the fruit of the incomprehension that every generation has for those that preceded it (the ideals of the deceased, having become empty for their descendents, are seen as false), the current disregard for Tennyson's great merits is unjust. For he was a poet indeed, and an artist in the highest degree. In a language to which his musical ear lent magical resonances and sonorities, he expressed the dreams, desires, and aspirations of his time. If some of these dreams have come true, and a great many more of them have proved unattainable, what fault is it of his? In poetry, *how* something is said will always matter more than *what* is said.

And yet there must be some reason, some cause for the misunderstanding. Much as one may say that Victorianism is wholly out of fashion, Arnold and Browning, Dickens, George Eliot and Trollope seem more in vogue than ever. What is really unfashionable today is not Victorianism, but optimism. And this well-fed, placid, and rather plump optimism had its major representative in Tennyson. There is in him a great deal of that *goody-goody* [7] spirit, that smiling acceptance which never fails to get on our nerves, now that we are no longer tranquil.

Tennyson is Pangloss turned poet, and great poet at that. We the Candides and Cunégondes of 1954, impoverished, raped, murdered, and on the verge of being atomized, we cannot forgive him for having been so serene and having expressed it so well.

I'd like to make a brief aside here to point out how many major English writers were,

7 In English in the original.



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like Tennyson, the children of churchmen, and to underscore how right that person was who once said that the celibacy imposed by the Catholic church on her priesthood has prevented precisely the most spiritual people from having children and thus deprived the Catholic countries of a tremendous source of intellectual ferment.

## *Browning & other Victorians*

The obscurity one encounters in Browning's poetry is never intentional, that is, never the result of pretentiousness: on the contrary, it is due to an overweening faith in the abilities of the reader, who isn't always endowed with the same lightning intelligence as the poet and only with time and effort manages to perceive the relations between one image and the next, which to Browning seemed immediate and perfectly natural. Thus often (and not always to our benefit) reading a poem of Browning's is like taking a hike in the Alps, where one must skirt precipices, ford torrents, and climb sheer cliffs to enjoy certain unforgettable panoramas. Yet the reading and the hikes are equally worthwhile: in both, the air of the summits is pure and the colors splendid.

The popularity of Edward FitzGerald is, I think, due to his frequent praises of libations, harmonies to which the English ear is highly attuned. I imagine he is also a useful antidote to the semi-Puritanical sermons the English hear every Sunday.

I have already given some indication of the perversity of my tastes. Occasionally I get the urge to read some truly, utterly, irremediably bad poetry. That's when I read Martin Tupper. I'm already amused just by his name, which is very close to an adorable and very stupid character in *The Pickwick Papers*. And lo the magical intuitions of genius: Martin Tupper's verses are the very thing that Dickens's Tupman would have written had he so applied himself. They are collected in a large volume with the bizarre title of *Proverbial Philosophy*, published in 1838. The solemnity, the vacuous pomp, the unfailing use of erroneous epithets, the utter deafness to rhythm are an unending source of delight. Tupper's fame was, in his day, very great. He is exactly what the Victorians thought a poet was, while Tennyson and Browning were a few steps beyond it. I am mathematically certain that I am the only living person in Italy to have read him. Cecchi and Montale do not know him, let it be said to their credit: to like him one must be a bit of a necrophiliac.

## *The late Victorians*

It goes without saying that I, personally, would be more interested in studying political history than literary history. And if I were the least bit competent and therefore able to engage in political history, what would most attract me would be the study of crises—or rather, of the ***beginnings*** of crises, the examination of that imperceptible fall in the barometer, that tiny cloud on the horizon, that lazy and (apparently) negligible puff of wind that later proves to be the first advance patrol of the cyclone about to be unleashed. Thrilling moments to relive, these, when the whole world is oblivious to what awaits it but a keen eye already sees what cannot fail to happen, moments of cruel rapture in which the man who knows can truly believe himself the equal of a god, aware that he knows the future not by some flight of fancy but through a precise understanding of the causes and the correlative consequences that will result from them.

In the lobby to the Messina Opera house there still hangs a poster pompously announcing, its bombast enclosed in the large block letters, that "Tomorrow, December 28, 1908, there will be a performance of *Aida*, an opera in four acts by Tizio Ghislanzoni, with music by Giuseppe Verdi," and so on.

Nobody who reads this notice, if endowed with enough wickedness and the



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ability to enter momentarily the body of a passerby of fifty years ago, can help but feel within himself, for a split second, the euphoria of omniscience, because he *knows*, and is alone in knowing, that on the evening of December 28, 1908, not only will the *Aida* not be performed (no great misfortune), but neither the theater nor the rest of the city of Messina will exist any more.[8]

An old diplomat once described to me the anxiety he felt one evening in late July 1914, when, coming out of the Foreign Ministry and repairing to a café, he saw people laughing and making vacation plans, whereas he had learned ten minutes earlier (and was the only person in the crowd to know) that the Austrians had already delivered their ultimatum to Serbia, and he therefore knew there would be no vacations that year and that soon the laughter would turn to anguish.

But my senile garrulousness has got the better of me again. What I meant to say was only this: that I am especially attracted to the late-Victorian era because in the writers of that time one sees clear signs of the great crisis that will shatter the balance that had been so miraculously achieved and even more miraculously preserved for so long.

These fascinating writers of crisis use the old, quiet language to utter curses, carry hand grenades inside their top hats.

I actually prefer them (in cases of equal talent) to their placid parents and their unruly children. They put a surprise in every sentence; like Erasmus, who hid a poison in every fold of his elegant Latin.

"I realized the Revolution was inevitable when I noticed that the patissier was putting less butter in the brioches." So wrote Mme de la Tour d'Auvergne in her memoirs. A less frivolous observation than it may appear, it could, for our purposes, be changed as follows: "One realizes that Victorian stability is near its end when we see Hardy, O'Shaughnessy, and Lionel Johnson dashing off their verses a bit carelessly and paying more attention to effect than to observing the rules."

There is no lack of butter, however, in the brioches baked by Swinburne; indeed, there is too much.

## *Walter Pater*

What's wrong with Walter Pater's prose is not, as the asses say, that it reads like poetry: it's that it reads like science. Every sensation is first examined to determine its level of good taste; then, if judged to be sufficiently charged with beauty, it is killed, sterilized, quintessentialized, and fixed on the page, that we may admire its iridescence. Not poet, but entomologist. Scientist, that is. Every word is an element in a formula; Pater's prose is, inevitably, dazzling, obscure, and slow. A perpetual *adagio*.

At the same time, in France, Stéphane Mallarmé was developing a similar system. And as long as "art for art's sake" remained in the hands of these two ascetics of a sort, it was a respectable notion, a bit like "religion for religion's sake," with the same high-mindedness and the same lack of sympathy for humanity. But since "art for art's sake" by its very nature tends to abolish ethical restraints (a radical attempt by the prisoner to shake the bars of his prison), it was inevitable that it should fall to lower levels and end up in the hands of hedonists. Who played havoc with it.

In England the decline occurred very quickly: Wilde was already in full swing when Pater died. In Italy, it happened a little later: D'Annunzio was still young at the time of Pater's death, but already showed promise.

In France the whole sequence was oddly transformed by local conditions, which are too complicated to explore right now.

I wish merely to add that Pater's influence on D'Annunzio is direct and, so to speak, palpable, as anyone who knows the work of both can see. But not only on D'Annunzio. The cult of Leonardo, the cult of St. Francis, the admiration for the "beautiful beast" of

8 A devastating earthquake leveled the city on that day.



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the Renaissance, the mysterious smiles of the Gioconda and the Duchess of Bisceglie washing her hands in the silver bowl are all direct offspring of Pater, and often, all too often, they are myths expressed with the very same words their creator used.

## *On judging more recent writers*

Do I, lowly me, really have to make definitive judgments? The world will not collapse if I say (which I have no intention of doing) that the fame of H. G. Wells will defy the centuries, and then it turns out that twenty years from now nobody remembers his work at all.

Will I be boring? Nothing is more educational than boredom. Scholastic boredom, for example, is a student's first authentic experience of real life.

But will it be of any use? But what is really useful? The most patently indispensable things, such as a loaf of bread, serve only to allow a rascal to do rascally things for another twenty-four hours.

So let us proceed!

## *Henry James*

He wandered through the drawing-rooms of Europe like a god on holiday, observing with dispassionate curiosity the strange attitudes of a certain class of mortals, especially those who behaved most strictly in accordance with the rites and traditions of their class; and he lingered only when the so to speak liturgical gesticulations of his models most forcefully betrayed a moment of inner crisis.

## *On determinism in literature*

Every work of art (I'm thinking of Proust here) is created by dozens of predecessors (to say nothing of the thousands of social and economic causes) to whose creations the latest artist merely adds a few of his own (predetermined) qualities. He lays the crown upon the completed edifice that has, however, been built by others as well.

## *George Bernard Shaw*

As a reasoner, Shaw was flawless, and had he been able to temper his own glibness he might have reached a higher level. He also would have done well to restrain the tendency to farce, not always in the best of taste, which mars many of his plays. Yet not even this would have sufficed to make him a true poet of the theater. His personality was endowed with intellectual tentacles that sought, seized, probed ideas, yet he lacked an equivalent sensitivity to human feelings. And without emotional sensitivity, one cannot create characters; and without characters there can be no theater, in the fullest sense of the word. In all of Shaw's theater, there is only one character, an extremely good one: George Bernard Shaw himself, the shrewd, comprehensive, sometimes profound character who appears in the most varied of guises, yet is always the same.

From this innate *sécheresse* of Shaw's stems the fact that the best of his characters are historical or at the very least placed in a very specific historical setting, which would seem abnormal for a true poet but in this case is as natural as can be: in Caesar, Cleopatra, and St. Joan, he found characters already outlined by history or tradition, and had no need to go looking in vain for emotions in his own brilliant but dry personality. All he had to do was to dress up these already "given" characters in his own scintillating dialectics, and all would be well. Too well, sometimes, as is the case with *Saint Joan*, where he let his argumentative genius get out of hand and ended up putting into the mouths of Warwick, the Inquisitor, and the Bishop such a wealth of subtle arguments



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and paradoxes that by the end they seem to be right and the simple, emotional Joan wrong—which certainly was not his intention.

Though endowed in his own right—when his ideologies allowed him to be—with considerable artistic gifts, he never realized that his (or Shakespeare's or Ibsen's) poetic abilities alone constitute the immortal basis of the work; in other words, he did not understand what vanity has always prevented mediocre artists from understanding, that their own ideas in general are worthless; they are always simplified reproductions of the ideas of boring but far loftier thinkers; and only when orchestrated by that ensemble of sounds and images that is art can they take on a value that is often higher than that of those same thinkers, who were not artists. As a thinker, Valéry is nothing compared to Bergson, and Eliot nothing compared to Husserl; likewise, Shaw in the end did nothing but rehash the ideas of Marx and Nietzsche. It is the transformation of these second-hand ideas into emotions that makes the poet. What's more, the playwright must make us feel them through a third essence: character. Sometimes these universals are hardly embodied at all; other times they are embodied in full, and then we have a masterpiece, a rare thing indeed. In Shaw's opinion, a play that put forth a noble thesis was necessarily beautiful, which is not the case. And three times he came within a few steps of making a masterpiece.

There is a further problem in him as well: his "ideas" (that is, the ideas of his great but unliterary predecessors) are all social ideas, that is, destined by their very nature to die, whether they are realized and become concrete realities, or they prove false and become humbug. No fundamental problem of man, whether slave or bourgeois or socialist, none of those problems that can never be changed, was ever touched upon by Shaw. Today (and much less often than twenty years ago) one goes to see a Shaw play because he often is, in fact, amusing. Yet fifty years from now, when women will all be dressed like men, when there are no more greedy landlords and the practice of medicine will have been nationalized, what will he matter to us?

He sinned against art: he sacrificed his great potential on the altar of ideas not his own.

## *James Joyce*

In *Ulysses* Joyce not only wanted to show us the spectacle of life as seen through his own inner vision; this vision, in his mind, also contained the inner vision of the other characters. Thus we have the famous Joycean three-level descriptions: there is the level of the author, the level of the character in itself, and the level of the character as rendered by the author. It is a technique of incomparable difficulty, which sometimes, indeed often, creates astonishing effects of perspective depth; yet more often still, our minds, which are not Joyce's, nor Joyce's character's, nor Joyce's character's as perceived by Joyce, see only a logogriph, which, however, we would be fools to disparage.

In *Ulysses* nothing is kept under wraps; none of the reader's delicacies of sentiment is taken into consideration. One can only love the book or hate it; but one cannot but admire its heroic vitality. Some will say it's dreadful; but no one can deny that it's the work of a master.

*Ulysses* is an acid test: those who swear by Proust, who claim Eliot is facile and Dylan Thomas childishly clear, feel their heads start to spin when they open up *Ulysses*. It may well be pleasurable to observe the functioning of one of those artificial brains irrigated by fake blood that can be seen at the Deutches Museum, transmitting orders to the aluminum nerves with silent precision; but to sit for eight hundred pages watching the equivalent of a man run over by a train, with his intestines, liver, lungs, and every other part of himself in full view, requires a great deal of self-control. Which few people



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have. And those who don't, vindicate their disgust by calling Joyce a mystifier. It's the old, foolish contumely of the Pharisees.

(I have to stop here because I can feel my anger rising.) [9]

I said earlier that *Ulysses* could be understood in full by an Englishman who was at once exceptionally cultured and exceptionally vulgar. To understand *Finnegans Wake*, on the other hand, one would have to be God.

Joyce could not have better demonstrated his contempt for humanity than by spending sixteen years writing a book that nobody would be able to understand. In *Finnegans Wake* he has broadened the field of linguistic experiment, he has cast beams of light into the bottom of tainted wells. But has he made a work of art? He alone can answer: if his intention was to represent for himself the intertwining of images in his own mind, he has certainly succeeded. But since we are not Joyce, we are not in a position to say.

## *T. S. Eliot*

Eliot is not at all the "sun-drunk poet" who sings his carefree songs to the wind (I'm forcing myself to imitate the style of those who want this sort of thing); he is a metaphysical artist, one who manages to burn his own philosophy while writing, but who later, with lucid mind and terse prose, extracts the pith of thought himself. In this, as in many other things, he is close to Leopardi. Does he have heart? (It has apparently become fashionable—here in Italy of course—to ask this question.) No, he doesn't, if by heart we mean trying to squeeze tears from the reader by reminding him of his sorrows and cuckoldry—an approach which these days is the exact equivalent of prostitution; but he has a great deal of heart, if by that word we mean a trepidation not for this little woman or that little man, but for humanity and its destiny.

## *Graham Greene*

Enclosed within an exact and imperative faith, Graham Greene does not need, like C. S. Lewis or Charles Williams, to create a personal mythology for himself in order to exorcise Hitler, Stalin, and the hydrogen bomb. He merely turns to Catholic doctrines, which in his interpretation seem quite other than those preached in church every day. It is rather unlikely, but not entirely outside the realm of possibility, that one day Greene will become Pope. If he does, then we shall all become Catholics with him.

His warmest admirers (who are not always the most insightful) are often surprised by how attracted he is, without repulsion, to everything that is repulsive and putrid. But this is merely the Christian attitude: if Christ had refused to touch the lepers and to speak with the Samaritan woman, the former would have remained sick and the latter sinful. The Christian *is supposed to be* attracted to rotting flesh, like hyenas, like Baudelaire, like the angel of the Resurrection. Greene's horror at the filth of the beastly and unredeemed creature is mitigated by the insuppressible resemblance to God that he finds in even the lowliest criminal; his repulsion is thus transformed, as he so magnificently put it, "in a forward flight" seeking to wash the mud and pus from features nonetheless divine.

*(This is Part II of a two-part selection from* Letteratura inglese. *Part I appeared in our September issue.)*

9 Lampedusa here is speaking indirectly to his friend, the music critic Pietro Sgadari di Lo Monaco (known as "Bebbuzzo"), who strongly disliked (and couldn't understand) Joyce and called him a "mystifier."



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# Six poems
## *by Donald Hall*

### Storefront

When Newberry's closed
in Franklin, New Hampshire—homely lime front
on Main Street, among the closed
storefronts of this milltown depressed
since nineteen twenty-nine;
with its lunchcounter for beans and franks
and coleslaw; with its bins
of peanuts, counters of acrylic,
hairnets, underwear, workshirts,
marbled notebooks, Bic pens, plastic
toys, and cheap sneakers; where Ruby
worked ten years at the iron
cash register, Alcibide
Monbouquet pushed a broom at night,
and Mr. Smith managed—
we learned that a man from Beverly
Hills owned it, who never saw
the streets of Franklin, New Hampshire,
but drew with a well-groomed hand
a line through "Franklin, New Hampshire."



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## Lost

At three, living in the rented
house on Winette Street, I strayed
three blocks away, and the word *lost*
crashed in my ears like the sea
until a neighbor led me back
to my house and my mother.
When Doctor Clark telephoned
about the hourglass-shaped lesion
in my liver, I was sixty-three
and lost. Jane and I lay
on the painted bed weeping
and hugging. Only the body
of the other—rocking,
hopeless, wet-faced—provided us house.

## Regret

Just before I entered
Dartmouth-Hitchcock for a procedure
to remove the metastatic
cancer from my liver, Jane
met the lawyer Buckingham
at the store, who politely asked
how we were doing.
When she told him, Bucks looked melancholy:
"Gosh. I never did get
to know Don, the way I wanted to."



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# Goodnight

The three-year-old with tight
yellow curls stood by the back porch's
screen door, his stolid legs
in shorts, wearing a sweater, holding
a carrot in his right hand:
I feel myself inside his face.
For a week my mother pulled a carrot
from the back garden
for my supper; this evening
I pulled it myself and brought it
to her. Her pride wrote postcards:
"You'll never guess what Donnie did!"
Today, sixty years later,
I gaze at the loose flesh of my
upper arm, where muscle flourished,
sagging wrinkled and puckered
like the flesh of my calves and thighs
hanging punky and useless.
As I wait outside the Infusion
Room for the 5FU
to heat my hand with its eighteen
CCs of poison, among
other skeletons of flesh
ingesting similar poisons,
I feel pity for my racked body
that sickens itself to
try to remain itself. Then I forgo
self-pity by the
only turn that discharges self-pity:
Among reading stacked
in the waiting room, I observe
a copy of *Goodnight Moon*.



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## Borders

Peonies as big as turkeys
protect in each blossom a
freckle of red like paint
flecked from a toothbrush—O reticent,
O most delicate clumsiness!—
that softens and elevates
early bright days of summer.
Late in August a hummingbird
poises at a peach hollyhock
eight feet tall, its faint-edged pale
house of flower, hesitating to
enter crinks of pink zone. I
gaze into bird and flower,
to inhabit the blossoming now.

## Order

That time I needed to order
thirty-eight veal chops for the
Society's dinner,
and figured that nobody would stock
so many, I asked Druzetich
the Butcher, "Can I order
ahead?" "Sure," he said, with
his grasp of idiom, "no problem."
He grinned with Hungarian competence:
"What kind of a head?"



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Music

# New worlds & old

*by Samuel Lipman*

Despite the marked shift of our elites away from material and moral support for classical music, the release of new classical CDs continues apace: the summer issue of the *Schwann/Opus* catalogue has some eighty-six closely packed pages of new releases, listing approximately three thousand additions to the already bulging spring issue. New labels, many of them foreign, keep springing up, and just about all the old ones continue the fight as well. The result is a horn of plenty for music lovers who would rather listen to music than hear it talked about.

It would be vain to expect that all this fresh material would be of permanent value or even of great current interest. But as a mirror to our musical times, new CD releases provide an unparalleled opportunity to survey the state of what passes for the art these days. Perhaps this is most poignantly true in contemporary music, where the profusion of discs makes clear the profound emptiness of a superficially thriving creative world. On occasion, the new CDs also have much to tell us of a happier time, not only in composition but also in performance, through reissues sonically resuscitated by the wizardry of today's engineers.

In the case of contemporary music, it is tempting to blame the messengers—i.e., the CD labels—that bring the bad news. But to do so would be a mistake, for only by knowing the condition of present-day composition can one properly evaluate both the role of the past in musical life and the prospects for the future. In this sense, it is a pleasure to congratulate our chief messenger in these matters, New World Records. Begun in 1975 with funding from the Rockefeller Foundation, New World first produced the Recorded Anthology of American Music, a set of one hundred discs containing, in the words of a 1981 index, "not only concert art music but everything from marching bands to bebop, film music to field hollers, symphonies to theater songs [and] distributed as a gift to almost 7,000 schools, libraries, non-profit radio stations, and other educational institutions." Then, in the 1980s, New World went public, producing for the consumer market more than a hundred LPs of new works and new transfers of distinguished earlier commercial recordings.

Now New World has moved on to CDs, which it makes available in thin soft plastic slipcases, accompanied by informative notes. A recent release of three CDs, remarkably varied in style, continues the label's catholic choice of repertory. One CD (NWR 80431-2) is devoted to the electronic/acoustic music of the established academic avant-gardist Roger Reynolds; the second (NWR 80430-2) to works written by Americans for Balinese gamelan orchestra; and the third (NWR 80439-2) to the acoustic music of Wes York, a composer with a broad background in pop music, sound engineering, and computers.

There are two works on the Reynolds CD. The first, called *The Ivanov Suite* (1991), is a



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group of seven pieces—"Trumpet Dream," "The Scream," "Religious Music," "The Brides," "Piccolo Dream," "Monogatori," and "Primitive Music." This suite was written to accompany a reworking, by the Japanese theater director Tadashi Suzuki, of the play by Chekhov. The second, *Versions/Stages* (1988–91), is a group of five unrelated pieces—"Cello Dream," "Dionysus," "Waterfall," "Farewell Cult," and "Ocean." The sonic material of the two compositions includes traditional instruments such as piccolo, trumpet, cello, violin, and percussion as well as their electronic transformation, the sung and the spoken voice, and recordings of natural sounds such as waves and waterfalls.

The result, not surprisingly, is a prime example of what might be called the grunt, groan, and gripe (or the scream, scrape, and scramble) school of avant-garde music. It is remarkable that composers continue to explore this arid ground: surely the example of Karlheinz Stockhausen, who has been writing such music for the past forty years with nothing to show for his efforts save a plethora of recorded noises, should serve as a warning.

Here in Reynolds—as in the more imaginative but no more beguiling Stockhausen—are sounds possessing extreme dynamic contrast. The composer, evidently worried that the listener will not experience the full loudness of the recorded material, gives instructions for setting the playback volume control so that the concluding pieces of each work will be heard at "very assertive levels." The other parameters of the sounds—timbre, rhythm, tempo, and even melody—are also marked by extreme contrasts. But the result for me is a combination of boredom and distaste: boredom because neither the sounds nor their combinations possess intrinsic interest, and distaste because so many of the sounds, as in "The Scream" of the *Ivanov Suite*, are so very ugly in themselves. I will readily grant that I did not listen to Mr. Reynold's compositions at his recommended volume level; early on I decided to save my hearing for better music, both old and new.

The CD of Balinese gamelan music written by the Americans Evan Ziporyn, Michael Tanzer, and Wayne Vitale is, of course, a reflection of the interest in Eastern musics, so marked in America over the past sixty years, and perhaps culminating in some of the music of Steve Reich. There can be little doubt that both the seductive melodic patterns and the resonantly percussive timbres of Balinese music are fascinating when heard as part of the context of the civilization from which they come. The influence of these busy sounds on Western composition goes back as far as the Paris International Exhibition in 1889, where the Balinese music was heard in the West for the first time. One of the entranced listeners was Debussy, who—perhaps also under the influence of the Indochinese music he heard at the Paris Exhibition of 1900—wrote his marvelously evocative "Pagodes," the first piece of his suite *Estampes* (1903). "Pagodes" used in its melody a pentatonic—i.e., five-note, rather than the usual Western twelve-note—scale.

By the 1930s Balinese music seemed relevant to Western composition in more than a simply evocative sense. In 1936 the American composer Colin McPhee (1900-1964) wrote *Tabuh-Tabuhan*,[1] an orchestral piece with a prominent role for two pianos making the percussive sounds associated with Balinese music and a large brass section providing a more Western melodic interest. *Tabuh-Tabuhan* is perhaps the masterpiece of this hybrid style of writing, providing a delectable combination of Oriental exoticism with big-band swing. By contrast, the authentic performances of Balinese music by native ensembles available some years ago on a Columbia LP[2] seem to my ears endlessly iterative and ultimately pointless, but this negative comment, made on music ripped

1 *Tabuh-Tabuhan* is currently available on a Mercury CD (434310-2 FM) in a master transfer of a 1956 recording by Howard Hanson and the Eastman-Rochester Symphony Orchestra. The work greatly deserves re-recording with today's advanced technology.

2 ML (later CML) 4618.



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from its civilizational context, cannot be taken as a comment on the music itself.

As far as the New World CD is concerned, the American composers, for all their evident good intentions in living in Balinese communities and acclimating themselves to the civilization they found there, seem to fall uneasily between the two stools of authenticity and McPhee-like appropriation. As a result, the exoticism seems trite, and the musical invention sparse. It must be said, however, that played at a low volume this CD provides remarkably pleasant background music. Unfortunately, it is sadly clear that both the composers and the Balinese themselves have aimed rather higher than the presentation of a mere lulling diversion.

I must admit to a feeling of confusion engendered by the third CD, that of the music of Wes York. There are eleven works on this disc, one a piece called "Reminiscence 2" scored for flute, clarinet, and piano, another a piece called "Music for Strings" but played entirely on the piano, and the rest of them songs, using voices and supporting acoustic instruments and sometimes percussion. The accompaniment to the vocal lines is vaguely Reichian, emphasizing repetition and making the effect of a tender minimalism. The vocal lines are more adventurous, of relatively wide compass and with frequent leaps. Three songs use texts from American Indian sources, three others use texts by the poet Denise Levertov, and two songs are based on words of the Chinese poet Su Tung P'o. The vocal performances on this CD, by sopranos Nancy Armstrong and Susan Botti, tenor Bruce Lancaster, baritone Sanford Sylvan, and bass David Ripley, are uniformly excellent and often highly moving.

The moods York evokes are consistently nostalgic, gentle, plaintive; today they might be called "retro." The CD's interesting program notes by Mark Swed mention as York's sources the differing streams of minimalism represented, on the one hand, by the driving patterns of Philip Glass and Reich, and, on the other hand, by the more wispy, "mysterious and intangible ways" of Morton Feldman. For me, the referent of York's nostalgia is the late-modernist music that was being written by young American composers, bearing names now almost completely vanished, around the turn of the 1950s. This was a period when small, almost private, concerts of new music, often called "Composers' Forums," blossomed on every college and university campus and in every reasonably large city. This music seemed intimate, sparse in texture, and highly musical in everything save its avoidance of easy consonances. The time of which I am writing might be called American music just before the fall: the sudden appearance—perhaps "irruption" is not too strong a term—of the electronic manipulation of sound sources, of the post–World War II European vogue for works created for tape, and of the reduction of beauty in music to the parameters of total serialism. By the latter I mean the treatment of every component of music—pitch, rhythm, tempo, dynamics, and timbre—in the non-repetitive and artificial way Schoenberg and his disciple Webern treated pitch alone.

This horror was the composition associated, at least in my mind, with the German city of Darmstadt, which began a series of summer institutes in new music in 1946. Here were employed as lecturers the great names linked with the death of new music, beginning with Adorno, progressing through Boulez, Cage, Ligeti, Stockhausen, and Tudor, and ending with Xenaxis. The goal was ugliness, and the success was total. York has managed to escape all this, writing music that moves the soul—but at the cost of fleeing backwards to a happier day. I am confused about York's pieces because I can see no future for new composition in minor memorabilia, but one has no choice but, sadly, to wish him well. At least he has an ear for the touching.

To abandon the world of new music entirely, and to move from these three New World CDs to what is openly the music and the great performances of the past, can only



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be called a voyage from duty to pleasure. Such is the feeling I had upon listening to the recently released Pearl CD[3] of opera and operetta arias, along with several songs that defy easy characterization, by the famed Polish tenor Jan Kiepura (1902-1966).

Though Kiepura was a huge success in Europe—first in opera during the late 1920s and early 1930s and then, with his wife, the striking soprano Martha Eggerth, in operetta films for the German-speaking market—his leaving Europe as a refugee before World War II meant that his American career never quite acquired the magnitude and sparkle of his European career. In Austria, for example, Kiepura had been a star at the Vienna Opera from 1926 on, making a particular speciality of the roles of Cavaradossi in *Tosca* and Calaf in *Turandot*. His Viennese fame was great, there even being (as we know from *Looking for a Bluebird*, Joseph Wechsberg's delightful 1945 memoirs of Central European life) "Kiepura girls," bobby-soxers before their time, who attended each of their hero's performances and engaged in demonstrations after his star turns. At La Scala, he appeared in *Tosca*, *Turandot*, and *Manon*. His operatic career took him all over the world, including Berlin, Warsaw, the Paris Opéra and the Opéra comique, Brussels, Budapest, Prague, the Colón Opera in Buenos Aires, Havana, São Paolo, and Rio de Janeiro.

In the United States, Kiepura appeared often at the Metropolitan Opera from 1938 to 1942, singing (in addition to Cavaradossi) Rodolfo in *La Bohème*, Don José in *Carmen*, Des Grieux in *Manon*, and the Duke in *Rigoletto*. He left the Met to star with his wife in a revival of Lehar's *The Merry Widow*, which ran for some eight months on Broadway. He continued to give concerts, and appeared in several productions in the United States and Europe of *The Merry Widow*, always with Martha Eggerth opposite him. He died in 1966, still a successful performer.

The interest of vocal fans in Jan Kiepura has never died down, for his particular kind of brilliant lyric tenor, with easy high notes and supple technique, made his 78-RPM records from the 1920s, 1930s, and 1940s first collector's items and then highly attractive material for LP transfer. Two such transfers were issued: in the 1970s a two-LP Electrola (Germany) set[4] documenting performances of both Kiepura and Eggerth, and in the early 1980s a single Preiser (Austria) LP,[5] mostly duplicating the Electrola set but adding several important arias. Now Pearl (England) has issued a first CD and is promising a second.

As I listened to these Kiepura discs, I found myself thinking just how much more affecting, how much more musically exciting, how much more vocally satisfying all these performances were than what one regularly hears today in the opera house and on records. I was somewhat mistrustful of my reaction, not because I had any doubt about Kiepura's virtues, but because I have known the family for years; Kiepura's son Marjan (the co-producer and annotator of the Pearl CD) has studied the piano for some years with my wife, the pianist and teacher Jeaneane Dowis.

So I purchased a two-CD London set[6] of performances, mostly dating from his vocally palmy days in the 1970s, by the universally celebrated *primo tenore* of our time, Luciano Pavarotti. What a wealth of difference there was between the singers—a difference, I might add, all in Kiepura's favor. In aria after aria, from *La Bohème* to *Tosca* and *Turandot*—even including the ubiquitous Pavarotti signature-tune "Nessun Dorma"—it was Kiepura's singing that was characterful, sweet, and artistically brilliant. By contrast, Pavarotti sang (and sings) everything in a shouted, metallic monotone, the top notes strained and white. Whereas Kiepura always took the trouble to color his voice, Pavarotti often fails to make even a perfunctory attempt at using this basic technique for the projection of character.

3 Pearl GEMM CD 9976.

4 Electrola Da Cap 1C 147-29-135/6.

5 Preiser LV 1380.

6 *Tutto Pavarotti*, London CD 425 681-2.



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There are so many treasures on this Pearl CD that it is difficult to pick a favorite. I myself have two (in addition to the Puccini arias). First there is an emotion-packed 1941 setting, transcribed by Kiepura himself, of a "Prayer for Poland" to the music of the Chopin "Raindrop" Prelude in D-flat major (opus 28, no. 15). Here the spontaneous emotion consequent on seeing one's homeland and people broken under the heel of both the Nazis and the Soviets brings tears to the listener's eyes. Then, once more in the realm of great opera, there is Kiepura's 1942 recording of the "Flower Song" from *Carmen*. Softly sung at the beginning—but not crooned in the fashion of Pavarotti—the later high notes fully sounded but never screamed, the performance shines but never shows off. Here, as in everything Kiepura sang, is the joy of singing. I look forward to the second Pearl Kiepura CD with pleasure.

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## Forthcoming in *The New Criterion:*

The travel writings of Henry James *by Hilton Kramer*
Seneca: an introduction *by Dana Gioia*
Hollywood & Edith Wharton *by James W. Tuttleton*
Gertrude Stein revisited *by Guy Davenport*
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Art of the Quattrocento *by Creighton Gilbert*
"The Great Depression" on PBS *by James Bowman*
Robert Louis Stevenson *by Alan Rutenberg*
The Oneida experiment *by Marc M. Arkin*



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Art

# Rebecca Horn at the Guggenheim

*by Karen Wilkin*

I first became aware of Rebecca Horn through a German-born painter friend. I can't remember just how long ago it was—ten years? more?—but I recall clearly my initial encounter with a large black-and-white image of a woman folded into a giant fan. It was a new addition to a changing display on my friend's studio wall, an unpredictable collection that is a key to her preoccupations of the moment and a tribute to her ability to extract the particular from the random. It has included, at various times, photos of New Guinea warriors in paint and feathers, pictures of Islamic carpets, African textiles, exotic reptiles, gardens in the south of France, Indonesian basketwork, pictures of her children and herself, and pages from Arabic and Chinese newspapers. For a while there was a marvelous photograph of two raincoat-clad elderly Englishwomen, headscarves knotted under their chins, at work on a painting of a horse; seated comfortably on a flowered cushion in the paddock with their model, one had started at the head, while the other attacked the hindquarters.

That day, the woman with upraised arms and wrist-to-heels "wings" dominated. She looked something like an angel—one of those seraphim with no bodies—something like an immense insect or an oversized origami bird, and something like an updated version of Vitruvian man in his delimiting circle. Was she posing? Dancing? Was it costume or machine? The name at the top meant nothing to me. I learned that the poster was a relic of a recent trip to Germany, heard a description of performances involving artificially extended body parts—gloves with extraordinary fingers, a hat like the center of a maypole, a feather mask—but although the image of the figure enveloped by the white "wings" stayed with me, I thought nothing more about it. Not until 1985, that is, when I saw the exhibition "The European Iceberg" at the Art Gallery of Ontario, in Toronto. This survey of contemporary European art, photography, architecture, and design included everyone you would expect to find in a show organized by Germano Celant in those years: Baselitz, Beuys, Cucchi, Kiefer, Kounnellis, Merz, Penck, Penone, Polke, Richter, and all the rest of them. "Rebecca Horn" detached itself from the list of usual suspects, not solely, I must admit, because I remembered the poster, but also because it was one of the few female names among more than sixty participants. (For the record, the others were the architect Gae Aulenti, the conceptual artist Hanne Darboven, and the photographer Verena von Gagern—unless you count the sexually ambiguous and pseudonymous Salomé.)

Very little has remained with me from the show. I recall my irritation with Celant's condescension when he declared that what distinguished European artists from North Americans was their inheritance of literature, history, and culture in general. I also recall—more pleasurably—a couple of films



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by Rebecca Horn, one involving a pair of twins, set in a loft overlooking Madison Square, the other, at once more dream-like and more plausible, set in a severely elegant Tuscan villa. Oddly, it was Horn's "machines" and their relation to their settings that proved most memorable, not actors or plot: a white peacock's tail slowly unfolding in a bare white room, two silver swings swaying gently in another equally bare space, punctuated by doorways framed in gray Tuscan stone. I confess that when I began to write this article, I couldn't visualize anything else of hers in the 1985 show without consulting the catalogue, but the images and mood of the films have stayed vivid. Horn's unassuming, straightforward replies to questions at the screening were also memorable, not least because they set her apart from many of her colleagues, who seemed mired in theory and self-aggrandizement. The mesmerizing peacock's-tail machine, she said, was built because she wanted the image, but the white peacocks who roamed the grounds of the villa were molting, not displaying, at the time she had permission to film there.

Since then, I've sought out Horn's exhibitions whenever I could, and have gradually become acquainted with her idiosyncratic language: her fascination with transformation, with loss or failure to attain, with fragility and survival, with the passage of time itself. Her recurring references and themes are familiar now: the eggs, the pendulums, the birds, the alchemical fluids, the allusions to hermetic transformation and utopian quest. So are her machine-sculptures, elegant constructions that stutter into life at intervals, parodying with intense seriousness—as the peacock's-tail machine did in the film—the actions of living things, perhaps even of the artist herself. Horn is a well-known figure now, included in most ambitious international shows. On this side of the Atlantic, she is seen fairly regularly at the Marian Goodman Gallery, in New York, and she gets around. I've seen her installations in Los Angeles and Toronto; the latter show, a powerful embodiment of desire and frustration, was one of a series of site-specific works in a gorgeous Neo-Egyptian/Beaux Arts water-purifying plant on the edge of Lake Ontario and one of the very few shows to come to grips with the particularities of the setting. Two years ago, Horn's latest, most professional film, *Buster's Bedroom*, was shown (along with some of the earlier ones) at the Los Angeles Museum of Contemporary Art, as part of an exhibition of sculptures relating to the film.

Over the years, I've been, in turn, fascinated, moved, irritated, excited, amused, disappointed, and exhilarated by what I've seen, so I was extremely curious about the large Horn retrospective announced for this summer at the Guggenheim.[1] The show rewarded my curiosity. It filled in some of the gaps in my knowledge of Horn's development, reinforced some of my opinions and made me question others. Most of all, it confirmed my belief that she is an extremely provocative artist, albeit a wildly uneven one.

At the Guggenheim, Horn's constructions filled much of the rotunda, their irregular sequences of animation punctuating our progress down the ramp, measuring off the time it takes to descend the spiral. In the same manner, *Paradiso*, the most recent work, made specifically for the site, "measured" the space of the building itself. Rigged to hang below the newly radiant dome, *Paradiso* consisted of a pair of large, transparent, breast-like bowls, half filled with milky liquid. Metal rods, at once like snakes and lightning bolts, quivered at intervals, while "milk" dropped slowly and rhythmically the full height of the rotunda into the pool below; another "snake-lightning bolt"

1 "Rebecca Horn" was on view at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York, from June 25 through October 1, 1993. A catalogue, with essays by Germano Celant, Giuliana Bruno, Nancy Spector, and Katharina Schmidt, texts by Rebecca Horn, and interviews with the artist by Mr. Celant and Stuart Morgan, has been published by the Guggenheim/Rizzoli (341 pages, $59.95; $27 paper).



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(actually more reminiscent of a schematic bird) perched on the edge of the pool, straining to touch the surface, until, in the words of a Guggenheim guard, "a visitor who didn't know how to behave in museums" totally dislodged it. The effect of the floating hemispheres and creamy liquid, illuminated by the diffused light of the dome, was quite magical. (*Paradiso* had its opposite and more pedestrian number, *Inferno*, in the lower level of the downtown Guggenheim. A rather uninspired tower of skeletal metal beds, raked from time to time by electric sparks, it was dark and dry where *Paradiso* was light and moist.)

The other "major" installation in the rotunda, actually a sequence of related pieces, was adapted from previous sites. Whether the problem was in the translation or in the original, it was far less effective than *Paradiso*, reading as ponderous and rather clunky in contrast to the suspended, generous bowls. A tangle of tubes snaked through the Guggenheim, apparently piercing floors and partitions; at the top, three elegant drill-bits really did bite into the wall of one of the webs, but the rest was, as far as I could tell, an artful illusion. At intervals, contained "fountains" of mercury pulsed, creating momentary confusion as to whether the silvery-gray "drawing" wriggling though the rotunda was made of lead pipes or tubes of mercury. That blurring of the boundaries between the most base of base metals (yet one with a beautiful, rich surface) and that mysterious liquid, beloved of medieval charlatans and alchemists, quicksilver, was momentarily arresting, as was the equally momentary question of whether the tubes really did pierce their setting. But the cumulative effect of the piece was static, inert, overly literal, in contrast to the rich allusions of *Paradiso*. That difference, between metaphor and literalness, in fact, seems to me the crucial distinction in Horn's work, the one that determines, to a large extent, its success or failure.

Horn's early works, displayed at the Guggenheim in one of the new galleries off the rotunda and accompanied by showings of videos documenting their original functions, were essentially "costumes," like the great pleated wing that first caught my eye in the poster. They were wholly dependent on the body and intimately linked with how the body occupies space. While they were displayed more or less as sculptures, encased in their protective carrying boxes, Horn's long-fingered gloves, her maypole hat, her cockfeather profile mask, were meant to be worn and performed in, in order to bring them to life. These nightmarishly exaggerated, soft prostheses are really devices to test the boundaries of the human body—how tall? how long? how far can you reach?—and at the same time to reinforce the isolation of the individual. The feather mask all but prevents touching, the long-fingered gloves allow the wearer a phenomenal reach but eliminate sensation, the giant fans, including one made of feathers that seems to belong more to a tradition of striptease than high art, create private spaces that cut off the "wearer" from the outside world. Horn is subtle enough to hint that such privacy is an ambiguous condition, sexy and alienating all at once. There's often something vaguely medieval about these fabric constructions, like the grotesquely extended points of shoes, the dangling sleeves, and the tips of hats long enough to be draped as scarves that we see in French and Flemish Gothic miniatures. (Extending this connection, some of Horn's commentators have spoken of Bosch as one of her ancestors.)

That Horn sewed these objects, made them of soft "non-art" materials, was partly choice, partly necessity. Confined to bed for an extended period after severely damaging her lungs with more "traditional" art materials of the 1960s—fiberglass and resins—she was forced to find new ways of working. The experience of her illness—the story of her hospitalization and isolation sounds like a version of *The Magic Mountain*, unhappily without a Settembrini, a Peeperkorn, or an equivalent of Clavdia Chauchat—remains central to Horn's art. Her materials, indeed her entire way of working, has radically changed, so that the work for which she is



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best known, at the moment, depends on sophisticated technology and careful engineering, rather than domestic craft, but her obsessions remain—not surprisingly—the same.

When Horn succeeds, her delicate machines are as individual as the people—Horn herself and her circle of friends—who performed in her "costume-sculptures." The motions of the most eloquent recent constructions seem generated by emotion or at least by urgent need, not simply by exquisite motors, ingenious gears, and clever timers. (Horn's engineering is always extremely elegant and delicate; unlike the devices of other kinetic artists, the motors that activate her sculptures are always surprisingly small and unobtrusive, and at the same time so clean and beautiful that they function as parts of her sculptures, not simply as unavoidable necessities.) Horn courts the inherent anthropomorphism of her constructions, speaking of them as "imperfect," subject to exhaustion, just as people are. Her machines strain and fall back, extend to their utmost and fail to reach the desired end, struggle to get into sync with their opposite numbers and—like mis-timed windshield wipers—touch briefly and then move inexorably apart. Like the body extension sculptures, the machines test limits: the swing of a pendulum, the length of a probing rod, the ambiguity of an agitated pool of liquid. They seem to yearn, to lust, to fail.

When Horn fails, the machine remains just that—a machine. You wait to see what it does (or, in some instances, simply note the evidence of what it has done) and then forget about it. At the Guggenheim, both ends of Horn's expressive spectrum were represented. Several variants of her "painting machines," one incorporating a parade of revolving women's shoes, another, a pair of brandy snifters, turned the act of marking a surface into a convincing metaphor for making art and for creation in general. A pair of spiky brushes, like two outstretched arms, dipped frantically into cups of pigment, scrabbled at the wall, and then fell back, spent; color dripped on the satin shoes below, with as much paint puddling on the floor as remaining on the wall. The analogy was perhaps obvious, but the readings multiple: on the one hand, aspiration, ambition as an artist, femaleness, conventional roles of women, possibility of failure, and on the other, a potent sexual metaphor that converted the shoes into fetishistic objects. The graphic evidence of the once liquid state of the paint, despite its present dryness, and the machine's staggered repetitions of a single gesture made the passage of time and its effects part of the work's message, as is typical of Horn's best work, while the intense blue of the paint called up still wider ranging associations with nature, the Humors, alchemy, and much more. The brandy-snifter piece, whose earth-toned "wall drawing" had what may have been inadvertent, but no less startling, analogies with the work of Sigmar Polke (and compared favorably with it), was similarly multivalent. But a related work that simply waved two spray guns at the wall of the rotunda and produced something like a furniture-store version of an abstract painting, never transcended that fact and remained completely unengaging. The snake-like spray nozzles continued to agitate, to no purpose, and the whole thing seemed remarkably pointless.

Similarly, an eerie conjunction of paintbrushes and knives—a row of triangular blades reached up to "kiss," with infinite delicacy, a row of soft-bristled brushes—conflated pleasure and threat in disturbing ways, while a far more elaborate effort (mirrors, pistols aiming at each other or at their own reflections, and a startling noise, meant to suggest a shot—actually a mirror's being struck by one of the pistols' supports) failed to suggest anything other than itself. And so on, down the ramp. Works that were richly allusive and poetic alternated with complicated one-liners, most egregiously the inverted piano that poured its innards, in a controlled spill thoughtfully prefaced by a warning noise, above unwary spectators. When the work, part of the *Buster's Bedroom* series, was shown at LA MOCA, a lower ceiling forced viewers to keep their distance,



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giving the Guggenheim installation the edge for drama.

The catalogue photos and my own experience of Horn's work suggest that context often has a great deal to do with the power of her work to transcend literalness. The Toronto piece that I like so much was installed in a square, stone tower room overlooking Lake Ontario. Wings made of brushes in drying racks flapped hopelessly against a tall arched window, while a group of small canvases, splattered from above with cerulean blue paint, tumbled down the wall. The blue of the paint, the "waterfall" of the canvases, the brilliantly blue water of the lake, a narrow band visible through the window, spoke to each other and made the piece resonate. The brush-bird, struggling to escape, turned the potentially playful concept of the painting machine into something desperate and slightly sinister. Not long after, I saw two similar works in Horn's complex *Art Circus* at the Marian Goodman Gallery. Divorced from the austere room high above the lake, the bird-brush and the cascade of small canvases were unconvincing and trivial. Two extremely specific installations, well documented in the retrospective's catalogue, appear to be among Horn's most effective works because of their connection with place. A 1987 installation in Munster reclaimed, against the protests of officials, a ruined tower, once used by the Gestapo, while a 1992 project temporarily transformed a series of bedrooms in one of Barcelona's red-light-district hotels. Elements from Horn's wide-ranging lexicon—the abandoned shoes, the funnels that channel "magical" fluids, the restlessly tapping hammers—gain additional meanings when they are responses to specific places. Interestingly, though, isolation can sometimes transform Horn's work. I remember not much liking *Kiss of the Rhinoceros Beetle* in the 1989 *Art Circus* installation at Marian Goodman. It was overshadowed by the "circus ring" portion of the series (not included in the Guggenheim retrospective, but documented in the catalogue), with its questing pointer, its precariously balanced egg, and its piles of wet and dry pigments. Yet at the Guggenheim, the slow, relentless mating of the rhinoceros-beetle machine, the sustained tension of approach, the sparks and crackle of touch, the contrast of release, all seemed quite convincing.

At her best, Horn catches you unawares. While you watch one piece "perform" or wait to see how or when or if it will come to life, you glimpse another in brief motion out of the corner of your eye, or hear the sound of its falling back after its exertions; meanwhile, the piece you were concentrating on has had its moment of action and is once more at rest. It's very much like life; timing counts for a lot. It was both entertaining and interesting to watch Guggenheim visitors change the rhythm of their attention, following the dictates of Horn's measurement of time, a rhythm regular but widely spaced for individual works, yet cumulatively irregular and unpredictable for the exhibition as a whole.

Screenings of Horn's films throughout the duration of the show made it possible to track her complex interweaving of object and allusion, "reality" and invention. Horn's early "sculptures" were, in fact, not autonomous objects, but meant to be worn and performed in by specific individuals, while many of her subsequent machines—or at least, versions of them—"performed" in her films, not simply as props but as characters, alongside her cast. (The sensuality of these works, their amalgamation of longing and denial, are only apparent when you see the performances.) Most recently, in *Buster's Bedroom* and the sculptures related to it, the connection between object and function has become more tenuous. The constructions become metaphors or distillations of events —however unlikely—in the film. *Buster's Bedroom*, an elaborately plotted fantasy about a clinic-*cum*-bin where Buster Keaton was a patient, seemed to me the most overwrought of Horn's films and the only one in which plot and a cast of recognizable stars overwhelmed imagery—the entrancing Valentina Cortese excepted. The relatively un-



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transformed objects that figure quite importantly in the film—a motorized wheelchair, a straitjacket, an iron bedstead—were fairly inert, detached from their film context, while Horn's improvisations on the film's themes—a tattered sheet-music/bird machine, for example—had more impact. (The less said about a series of glass boxes enshrining a variety of "artifacts," the better; they read only as a blatant effort to turn elusive, site-specific imagery into salable commodities.)

For the most part, Horn trusts her work to speak for itself, without the burden of text or explication. Her language is, mercifully, a visual one. It's worth noting the differences between Horn's statements in the catalogue of the Guggenheim exhibition and the essays by Germano Celant, Nancy Spector, Giuliana Bruno, and Katharina Schmidt. In a couple of interviews, Horn speaks of her experience, of her responses to particular sites and their histories, of what has provoked her imagery, of how she thinks about what she makes. She's clearly intelligent, thoughtful, a voracious reader, and impatient with pretense (well, perhaps except for that of art-world professionals who are good for her career). It's illuminating and appealing. The essays, especially Celant's, are models of pretentiousness. They strive to pin down every conceivable association elicited by Horn's art, itemize everything that could possibly be read into it, from Rosicrucian mysticism to the myth of Narcissus, and generally exhaust the reader with meticulously extracted references. I'm not saying that it isn't all there—such layers of meaning are part of what makes Horn's work worth paying attention to—but it's excruciating to have it all listed, as though the viewer were incapable of making connections for himself. (Maybe this has something to do with Celant's belief that Americans are all illiterate, uncultured, and unable to make historical associations.) The catalogue itself is a substantial document only marginally linked to the actual exhibition, full of photographs of site-specific works in Europe and stills from Horn's films. If there's a checklist of the Guggenheim show anywhere, I couldn't find it. Still, the catalogue is full of information about Horn and her work, which is, I suppose, all you can reasonably hope for.

The factory, the studio, the sanatorium, the alchemist's laboratory, the bedroom, and the body are all present in Horn's work, sometimes all at the same time. It's clearer than ever from the Guggenheim show that she is capable of heights of evocative metaphor, at her best, and of flat-footed literalness, at her worst, with both extremes elicited by identical themes. It's not a question of whether the work is early or late, or even of the type of object (for the most part), but rather of the quality of Horn's thinking and how she chooses to make that visible. It goes without saying that the appearance and the physical qualities of what Horn makes count for a lot. The way a fragile egg and a threatening pointed rod abut, the way an insubstantial cone of pigment echoes a funnel that holds the memory of liquid once channeled through it, the contrast of powdery pigment and sleek stainless steel, of man-made and natural substances, are as important as the associations they call up in the viewer; if they weren't, Horn wouldn't be worth taking seriously. When she succeeds, she makes things that are richly associative, poetic, engaging on many levels, and visually seductive. When she doesn't, she settles for simple equivalence between what she has made and something in the real world: the beating feather "fan" not as an emblem of desire to soar, to escape, to transcend, but just as a clever approximation of a bird. That's not just the difference between evocation and rendering, or even between invention and depiction; it's the difference between poetry and prose. I prefer Horn as poet.



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Theater

# At long last, Lulu

*by Donald Lyons*

The character of Lulu might have seemed forever stuck in the trope of the heavy-lidded femme fatale—*might* have, that is, had it not been for the recent presentation, by the Jean Cocteau Repertory, of the whole of Frank Wedekind's gigantic Lulu play. This was its first staging anywhere in English, in a new translation by Eric Bentley. The history of the work, like its nomenclature, is tangled.

Wedekind, born in Hannover, Germany, in 1864, went to school in Switzerland and based his first dramatic masterpiece, *Spring's Awakening* (1891), on his adolescent experiences there. This astonishing play, at once satiric exaggeration and ecstatic celebration of the overheated passions of youth, included—boldly, cavalierly, casually included—sex, abortion, suicide, and homosexuality. It was, in Wedekind's words, "generally regarded as unheard-of filth." Max Reinhardt was daring enough to stage it in 1901, but the results did not please Wedekind, who felt that the producer had made "an angry, deadly earnest tragedy, a thesis play, a polemic in the service of sexual enlightenment—whatever the current slogans of the fussy, pedantic lower middle class may be"—out of what its author had intended as a comedy with "a sunny image of life in every scene." A quirky customer, Wedekind, but he was in fact justified in insisting on the pervasive humor, verging on farcicality, that paradoxically suffuses *Spring's Awakening*. One example: the play ends in a graveyard with a youth being solicited by the shade of his friend, a recent suicide, to join him in death ("Give me your hand. If you give me your hand, you'll fall down laughing . . .") and being simultaneously counseled by a mysterious Nietzsche-spouting Man in a Mask to choose life. (*On the Genealogy of Morals*, all but quoted in this scene, had just appeared in 1887.) Hurry up and decide, urge the apparitions, for the ghost is not warmly dressed and the Masked Man feels a graveyard is hardly the place for prolonged philosophical disputation.

This note of tough, Nietzschean mockery was to sound again in Wedekind's *magnum opus*, the five-act play he called *Pandora's Box: A Monster Tragedy*. (This is the Cocteau Repertory's play, though they chose to call it *The First Lulu*.) He wrote it in the years 1892–94, but it received a production only a decade later and on that occasion was divided into two plays, *Earth Spirit* and *Pandora's Box*. In both of these plays Wedekind "adulterated" the original material, toned it down for the censors and keyed it up into a shrill misogyny absent from the earlier version and attributable to the malign influence of Strindberg. (According to Eric Bentley, Wedekind had in the early years of the century had an affair and a son with the estranged wife of Strindberg.) G. W. Pabst's film with Louise Brooks (1928) and Alban Berg's unfinished opera (produced 1937) were based, loosely and distortingly, on these later Lulu plays.

The complete original manuscript lan-



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guished unappreciated in a family archive until 1988. Recognized at once in Germany as a lost Ur-masterwork, it has been produced there on the stage and on television to great acclaim.

The first three acts of *Lulu* (as I shall call the Cocteau version) record the swath cut by the eponymous heroine, an exuberantly kept woman of eighteen, through the bohemian bourgeoisie of Munich. About exposition of past events and indeed about narration of present events, Wedekind is impudently casual (he is forever tweaking the fastidious dramaturgy of his master, Ibsen); thus we learn in dribs and drabs that Lulu, a child of the streets, was plucked from the gutter and educated and groomed as his mistress by a rich, married writer who arranged for her to be wed to an old doctor. We open in the studio of the painter Schwarz. Lulu is posing in Pierrot costume, complete with shepherd's crook. "I like irrational dress so much," she says. Local aesthetes surround and chat about her, naïvely and foolishly and with exquisitely male vanity likening her to transcendental archetypes of nineteenth-century German art: she is compared to Wagner's Venus, and young playwright Alva (son of Lulu's keeper) declares his intention to star her in a four-act ballet of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* in which somehow a serpent will birth the superman. Lulu meanwhile gets hot posing; she wants to get down to just her slip ("it's a warm house") but the painter (they're alone) pompously resists her wantonness, declaring "as an artist I cannot afford to be accused of immorality." Soon he is chasing her up a ladder, which topples; the studio is in chaos (so much for the decorum of Wilhelmine art); enter aged doctor husband, who drops dead of a stroke. This is merely the first of the play's offhand deaths. Lulu, delighted (and why not?), says "he'll never make me do tricks again . . . I'm rich now." As they kneel over the body (he shocked, she gleeful), the painter quizzes her: "Is there a soul in your body?" "I don't know." "Are you still a virgin?" "I don't know." She sprawls, craving sex; he demurs and whines guiltily about the corpse, offering to change places with it.

By the second act, Lulu is married to the painter, but unhappily. On the floor with legs in the air, she complains to her keeper that the painter is uneducated and wants children; "I'm his condom," she says. Again the men around her compulsively liken her to archetypes: Eve and Helen and Mignon (the latter two Goethean incarnations of the *Ewig-Weibliche*). In this act, it is the painter husband who stumbles upon Lulu *in flagrante* (this time with the keeper) and promptly goes off to the kitchen to kill himself. The keeper's playwright son wonders horrorstruck "how to get this story on the stage." Lulu changes her clothes, remarking that the painter was always too high-strung. *Lulu* not infrequently plays like Racine rewritten by Sardou.

In Act III, Lulu is getting all dressed up for a Ball for Women Artists. A huge vase of tuberoses is center stage. She is now wed to husband number three, her recently widowed keeper, although she insists that "you didn't marry me, I married you." The pattern of copulative surprise is here repeated: this time her new husband finds Lulu making love to his playwright son, Alva ("I couldn't make love to a man who didn't dress right in every detail," she says while stripping). A gun appears in the husband's hands; the ensuing "Teutonic tragedy" is marked by characters diving under tables and crying, "I have to go to the bathroom!" The gun finds its way into Lulu's hands; two bullets find their way into her husband—there seems no actual willed, conscious act; it just happens. Shocked, Lulu asks, "Did I hurt you?" The dying father gasps, "You too, my son," and the playwright son, spotting an allusion, brightly answers, "*Julius Caesar*." Lulu is less literary; she shouts, "This is the high point of my life." The father dies; Lulu and entourage flee to Paris. Intermission.

These three Munich acts are of a piece in sounding a symphony—or rather a cacophony—of demotic sexual rhetorics. Lulu herself defiantly wriggles out of the confining



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girdle of femme-fatale-avatar promised by the Cocteau program ("Before Madonna, before Marilyn, before Marlene, there was Lulu"). This woman is more interesting and unpredictable than those iconic clichés. The men, horny and sadistic, lurch from contempt to worship: ". . . the dirt I took you from . . ."; ". . . so very firm in the legs, so dim in the head. . ."; "the same old honey pot"; "you open sewer." While maleness in *Lulu* is cruel, weak, and nasty, Lulu rolls about, legs flailing, yelling, "I'm a woman, I'm woman." Her countervailing grotesqueries are more fun than those of the males.

Eric Bentley likens the disjointed structure of the play to that of Brecht's later Epic Theatre; he compares the blunt, cold, raunchy brutality of Wedekind to that of the old German Moritat street ballads. One thinks too of the savage mixing of rhetorics in the "Nighttown" section of *Ulysses*. Wedekind drags the savage energies of the Id up into the upholstered dramaturgy of the Wilhelmine parlor stage. (Wedekind, by the way, was once imprisoned for insulting the Kaiser, and a character in *Lulu* refuses to interrupt sex to answer the door, saying "I don't care if it's the Kaiser.") *Lulu* is finally not about is-she-good or is-she-bad; it seems more a representation of the crashed chariot of the human psyche, with body and mind and will and art all rolling apart.

The fourth act takes place in a gaming establishment in Paris in 1888, two years after the Munich events. Now married (as if it matters) to the playwright son (he's Number 4), Lulu seems to have become a *poule de luxe*. A shady character who knows about her shady Munich past tries to blackmail her into joining a sleazy Cairo bordello. This is a manic, frenzied act full of quick, lurid subplots: a mother grooms her twelve-year-old daughter for prostitution; a lesbian Countess falls madly for Lulu; investments in a scheme to build a funicular on the Jungfrau crash and Lulu is ruined. It is like Zola's *Nana* glimpsed in freeze-frame blackouts.

The last act takes place three years later in a gloomy, gray attic in London's Whitechapel: water drips; the old painting of Lulu as Pierrot is on the wall; Lulu is reduced to street whoring; her menage is reduced to whimpering Husband Number 4 and the pathetically besotted Countess. "I dream of the ideal cigarette," says Lulu, but rat poison and parasites are more the order of the day. She is still a force of nature, but her totem is now the wolf or the hyena. As she had gone, cavalierly, through her four husbands, she goes, ineptly, through her first four johns: a spastic; a foreign nobleman (this guy kills her husband); a Swiss philosophy prof who wants her to talk dirty (she indignantly refuses, saying, "Moi, je fais l'amour") and then runs out when he stumbles on the husband's corpse. (The mode of farce, ever darker, persists.) The fourth john, shy and taciturn and furtive, she warms to, eventually offering him a freebie if he'll only stay the night. He is the Ripper and he eviscerates her (offstage), slaying the Countess into the bargain. As he departs, the dying Countess crawls across the floor, moaning, "Oh misery! Oh shit!" The Cocteau production has deleted the "Oh shit!"—apparently fearing an unwanted laugh; Eric Bentley, too, thinks an "audience giggle" is to be avoided at this moment. I wonder. Why should the squalid and protracted bloodlettings in London be any less able to occasion a variety of tonal response than the merry deaths in Munich? I think that nervous laughter, uncomfortable laughter—not campy laughter—is in a sense never inappropriate at *Lulu*.

Lulu's descent into prostitution entails another inflection of her character: she becomes a romantic. While she had always had a bit of the sadomasochistic temper of the whore, she did in her salad days scorn mere love when it was proffered by her bourgeois German suitors; she wanted sex. Now that she is literally a whore, she refuses the carnal degradations demanded by her customers and is turned on only by the sexless demeanor of the last client. Just so, her final, faithful attendant is no male lover at all, but the sadly unrequited Countess. Yet the Romantic Lulu remains a cruelly ironic, intel-



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lectual conceit, lacking the tidal-wave vitality of the Munich Lulu. Any whore might have cottoned to the Ripper. Shouldn't Lulu have one-upped him?

Here in *Lulu* and in *Spring's Awakening* Wedekind was a programatic artist, a writer who seems to have asked himself, "What would an Ibsenite drama of repentance and suspense and soul-discovery look like if Nietzsche, trampler over old and outworn spiritualities, were to write it?" Plus a little bit of sex, as Preston Sturges put it in *Sullivan's Travels*.

Wedekind, by the way, ended up a writer of plays in praise of supermen like Hercules, Samson, and Bismarck—ended up, that is, as a practitioner of what might be called "vulgar Nietzscheanism."

The Jean Cocteau Repertory deserves unstinted praise for their enterprise and integrity in offering this first full *Lulu* in English. Director Robert Hupp brings, especially in the three Munich acts, focus and clarity; making the portrait of Lulu central, he brings home the way images of Lulu, including her own, create her. She is also, though, *more* than the images of her. If the frenzy of Paris and the deadliness of London were less gripping, the cause is perhaps Wedekind. But it was wise to do the whole text, all three and a half hours. As Robert Hupp said to the audience at a post-performance discussion, "I felt we had a mission to do the whole play; it deserved its full voice." The *Times* found it an hour too long, but if Tony Kushner can exact seven hours, Frank Wedekind might claim half that time. The set design by Jim Lartin-Drake and the lighting by Giles Hogya work sensitively to concentrate—and on occasion to diffuse—attention.

The intelligent and attractive Elise Stone throws herself with articulate abandon into the title role. Lulu is at once unactable and uncritizable: that is, no actress can fully embody all that demonic selfishness and ruttishness; at the same time, to any carping—if, say, it were said that Stone has a voice of prose and not of poetry—it can be retorted, "Well that is just *your* idea of Lulu she is falling short of." What matters is that, by the end, Stone has silenced quibbles by the shaped sincerity of her energetic playing. Among the men, Craig Smith brings his crisp authority (he has aspects of a non-comic Harvey Corman) to the large role of Lulu's educator/keeper. Steve Chizmadia nicely gets the mix of artistic idealism and practical fecklessness in the playwright son. Even some of the rough and amateurish minor performances were, because of the context, more interesting than Broadway-smooth ones elsewhere.

Eric Bentley spoke after one performance of the difficulty of capturing Wedekind's language, "neither tragic nor comic, neither conversational-modern nor quasi-Shakespearean Schiller . . . grotesque but wholly serious." "I just tried," he said, "to climb into his brain." Eric Bentley, translator and apostle of Büchner and of Brecht, has been the most learned and the most vital critical voice in theater for many decades; he addresses with unique authority and inwardness the German theater's inbreedings of coarse and sublime. His achievement here as translator is a beautifully playable and juicy English; his larger gift is the opening to us of what must be ranked as among the supreme masterpieces of nineteenth-century theater. The Bentley version will soon be available, with introduction, from Applause Theatre Books.

In a day when the easy topicalities and glib gimmickries of a Peter Sellars or a Robert Wilson are applauded as necessary stimulants for somnolent classics, the artists at the Cocteau prove otherwise. They show that the right way to shock and surprise is not to lobotomize great plays but to climb, with hungry curiosity, into their brains.



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The media

# The air is blue

*by James Bowman*

Last month violence, this month sex. The talk of the new television season is the series "NYPD Blue" by Steven Bochco, the creator of "Hill Street Blues" and "Cop Rock," and David Milch, a former English professor at Yale. These two see themselves as artists because they do what people thought could not be done: they show more explicit sexual behavior and more naked flesh than has hitherto been seen on network TV. When asked at a news conference about yielding to pressure about the sex 'n' violence, Bochco replied, "I think if you do, you're in the television business, you're not in the television art"—which is about as clear a definition of "art" as we're likely to find these days. In television, at any rate, "art" means unveiling progressively more female torso. Or perhaps having suffered because you have done so—that is, when potential sponsors run for cover, as they have from "NYPD Blue." What Wyndham Lewis called "The Demon of Progress in the Arts" lives again—and, like so much else descended to the level of popular arts, as a demon of self-parody.

In dramatic terms, the show, to judge from the first episode, is a generic cop melodrama about divorce and alcohol and middle-age burnout. There is a hotheaded Irishman and earthy metaphors and large, grim-faced men with bodyguards eating spaghetti. It is only remarkable for the fact that not one but two women are depicted as betraying men by seducing them. I didn't think you could *do* that on network TV. It seems to have passed unnoticed amidst all the fuss about the skin. But in fact, Bochco wimps out on the only measure of progress known to me in this field. The nipple count is zero. We have backs, legs and buttocks, and one or two very brief side views of a breast in a total of one and a half sex scenes (owing to some rather more explicit gunplay, the first act of coitus is interruptus), but no frontal nudity. I record this here as a public service, since it is obviously information without which the viewer is ill-equipped to judge the likelihood of his being titillated.

The likelihood, in other words, is not great. That's how you know that Mr. Bochco is a disinterested artist and not a mere porn merchant. For those interested in the mere porn merchants I can recommend late night on Showtime, where you might be lucky enough to run across Joe Bob Briggs doing his *Emmanuelle* retrosopective. I was especially pleased this summer to have caught *Emmanuelle's Amazon Adventure*, a real gem that I hadn't seen before. Emmanuelle pretends to be a naked goddess arising from the river in response to the invocation of a tribe of headhunters. The savages are so astonished that the naked virgin they are about to sacrifice is enabled to escape. Of course, the late show with Joe Bob isn't so high-toned a venue as prime time with Steven Bochco, but it's more relevant to everyday life.

Emmanuelle cavorted between 11:30 P.M. and 1 A.M. in the week before the première of



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the all-new "Late Show with David Letterman," which is relevant to nothing very much, but does show that you don't have to undrape the female form to get written up in the papers for months. Dave is now doing on CBS exactly what he did on NBC for so many years, yet there seems to be an endless appetite for discussion of him and of the "Late Night Wars" in which he, together with Jay Leno, Arsenio Hall, Chevy Chase, and Conan O'Brien (sometimes the list is expanded to include Ted Koppel, rarely Rush Limbaugh), is said to be engaged. I strive to comment trenchantly upon this epic combat but can think of nothing interesting to say about it—perhaps because there is so little to distinguish the combatants one from another. If this is a "war," they seem to be prosecuting it by attempting to bore one another to death.

Apart from their opening monologues, in which they are licensed to nip briefly and woundlessly at the well-shod heels of the mighty of the earth, they all say the same things. They all strive to be aw-shucks nice guys. Whoever comes out on top, it will be a case of the bland leading the bland, yet the press, from *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* on down, seems to rank their titanic struggle right up there with the pursuit of the dashing Mohammed Aideed. I sniff no conspiracy here. If anything I suspect that most of the readers of these newspapers are more interested in the Leno *v.* Letterman bantamweight bout than in the Scarlet Pimpernel of Somalia, and that responsible journalists have skewed the balance between the two stories very much in favor of the latter. I only remark on the fact as a striking instance of what the people who still read seem to want to read about these days. Something doesn't add up here.

Consider the case of Michael Jackson, who was accused of having molested a thirteen-year-old boy by the boy's father, a dentist from Beverly Hills. If you are capable of reading a serious newspaper at all, does that not argue that you are smart enough and grown up enough to have even less interest in Michael Jackson than in Jesse Jackson? A man from Mars might think so, but no one else can. Howard Rosenberg of *The Los Angeles Times* lamented that this summer's rampant gossip-mongering was evidence of the slippage of journalistic standards and of the extent to which tabloid papers and serious news organs are becoming indistinguishable. But this understates the case. In fact the tabloid treatment of the *National Enquirer* was much more sober, factual, and informative than the hysterical thumbsucking of—say—*Time* and *Newsweek*, both of which devoted major articles to portentous philosophizing about "the end of innocence" and such folderol.

The lesson here is this: if you want tabloid news, go to the tabloids. Regular readers of the *National Enquirer* will be better informed than those who rely on the newsweeklies, which increasingly resemble such less schizophrenic spinoffs of themselves as *People* and *Entertainment Weekly*. Their journalistic purpose outlived, however, they still have the residual social function of reassuring otherwise serious-minded people that stories like that of Michael Jackson and his tooth-filling accuser are really *important*. So, with no new information to impart, they trick them out with a lot of windy but serious-sounding nonsense about "innocence" and the psychological "roots of loneliness," and busy doctors and lawyers and bankers—and dentists—with little interest in real art or politics will think to themselves: if it's in *Time*, it must be OK to read about. Max Frankel of *The New York Times* came closest to the sort of editorial heroism it would require to ignore the whole thing as it so richly deserves to be ignored. He told Howard Kurtz of *The Washington Post* that "We have no charges. We have an anonymous claim of wrongdoing . . . We feel a moral obligation to protect the complainee. We don't have to rehash every tidbit in this thing until something happens."

But of course the *Times* has run stories about it too. The whole affair brings to mind Clive James's series of programs on "Fame," which ran on PBS just before we went away



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for our summer break. It consisted of a seemingly endless parade of photographs and film clips of people who had nothing in common except that they were famous, about each of which Mr. James managed to think up a wonderfully witty wisecrack—except when they flashed by too quickly even for him. The series was itself a notable example of the phenomenon that it purported to identify—namely, the supersession in the public life of the media of such old-fashioned notions as distinction, glory, honor, and notoriety by mere fame, which is the possession of a single class of people distinguished only as celebrities. "Fame"'s entire rationale as television depended on just that conflation of categories. In this way, Clive James is to fame what Michael Jackson is to sex. And the intellectual weight conferred on Michael by the respectable press is given to Clive by PBS.

That is what PBS does. Bill Moyers, the thinking man's Geraldo Rivera, gets a similar cachet out of appearing there, but the network has probably not yet recognized, as *Time* and *Newsweek* have done, the full commercial potential of its position as certifier of intellectual seriousness. People will pay for that, just as art dealers will pay for an expert to certify a painting as being by a recognized master. If the network only had the wit to sell to the likes of Michael Jackson or Madonna the opportunity to be guest host of "Masterpiece Theatre," its affiliates could finally do away with those ghastly pledge drives. Alternatively, it could increase audience interest by surprising us more often in the way that it did last month with "Campus Culture Wars: Five Stories About Political Correctness" by the independent producer Michael Pack. Somehow Mr. Pack managed to stay within the bounds of "good taste" (as PBS would define it) and yet produced a show which anyone not himself besotted with the cant of the cultural puritans would have to acknowledge made the politically correct look very bad indeed.

How it gives one heart that even among programming officials at the network that brought us "Tongues Untied" there are those who are troubled by the excesses of the cultural Left (if not of the cultural Left itself)! For Pack's documentary, although it makes a considerable effort to be even-handed, allows the thought police and their informers to condemn themselves out of their own mouths. The first of Pack's five vignettes tells the story of Professor Murray Dolfman of the University of Pennsylvania, who was suspended for two terms for referring to black people as "ex-slaves" (as a Jew he called himself an ex-slave, too). Dolfman's one-time colleague on the law faculty at Penn, Professor Ralph Smith, placidly informed the camera that the whole affair was the product of "a power struggle between the old boys and the new kids on the block. And that's all that is going on in higher education today when you take away all the garbage about political correctness."

You might think that such a naked declaration of war on all that universities have traditionally stood for would forever discredit its perpetrator within the academy. But of course it will not, any more than "Campus Culture Wars" will force the puritans to confront the ugliness of their own image therein. Professor Smith is only the latest of many twentieth-century totalitarians to learn the first and most salient fact about modern liberals, which is that their belief that everybody else is just like them is impervious to experience. When some power-seeker tells them that reason, compromise, and the common good have no place in the class war in which he sees himself as engaged, they don't believe him. They think that paying him tribute—whether it is in the form of Czechoslovakia or of Professor Dolfman's career—is an alternative to conflict instead of a part of it, a losing move in the chess game they don't even know they are playing. In this sad and ruinous delusion they are, I fear, incorrigible.

What you can hope for, however, is that lies, absurdity, ignorance, and philistinism will still look like themselves even through liberal spectacles and so trouble, however faintly, the consciences of those whose in-



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dulgence towards the puritans comes at the expense of education. Michael Pack does a good job here, too. We may have become jaded by the rhetoric of ideologues like Professor Nancy Stumhofer of Penn State–Schuylkill Haven who claims to have been sexually harassed by the presence on her classroom wall of a reproduction of Goya's *Maja Desnuda* ("Dead Painter Harasses Prof" in the immortal local headline); but no one who has seen it will soon forget the earnest co-ed from the "Womyn's Concerns" committee who not only echoes this view but also discloses her belief that this painting of the Duchess of Alba is "a form of pornography" dating from a primitive era "when *Playboy* wasn't around." Likewise, the show juxtaposes an articulate and engaging member of the Mexican-American society at Stanford, who recounts his experience of being "encircled" and berated by fellow members unhappy about his politics, with a dean who claims with a straight face: "I never met anyone who was harassed."

The most powerful of the five segments is the last: about one Pete Schaub who was ejected from a Women's Studies class at the University of Washington–Seattle for asking unwelcome questions and expressing skepticism about some of the more outlandish of the assertions made by the course's teachers and "facilitators." This story relies more heavily than any of the others on the dramatic re-enactment of events—a technique that is these days, perhaps, an unavoidable distraction from the sober progress of traditional, talking-head documentary. It is also very entertaining and the only segment from which the network asked Pack to make cuts on grounds of "taste." Some of the descriptions of what the Seattle course taught about female masturbation were too much for PBS. "I feel much more happy that they put it on than that they cut some small things out," says Pack, "but in a way it illustrates the essence of political correctness. For their view is the opposite of what is acceptable in the classroom. There it is not acceptable to show the Goya *Maja*. That's sexual harassment. But it is OK to show graphic depictions of female masturbation."

Such a reversal of the normal ordering of proprieties could hardly have taken place at all without "artists" like Steven Bochco making their bids to run up the prime-time nipple count. We need not attribute any revolutionary consciousness to Bochco; I'm sure his art is enough for him. But he has struck a blow for the revolution. Although the "womyn" of Schuylkill Haven may consider what he does to be almost as pornographic as Goya, it has a progressive, even feminist political purpose. Bochco is really of their party since, like them, he has taken up the task of purging sex of eroticism and reducing it to mere prurience. They do it for political reasons and by means of censorship; he does it for what he imagines to be "artistic" reasons but very much with the grain of the medium of television itself, which is as inimical to the erotic as it is to the sublime. Instead of the former you have Bochco's brand of anonymous naked writhing; instead of the latter you have the cheap uplift of *Reader's Digest* the TV show, just introduced on ABC, which is not much for traditionalists to put up against the *Zeitgeist*.

Even cheap uplift may well not be cheap enough for TV, since it looks even more fake there than fakery without pretensions. Television is in this sense a cynical medium, but it is the engagingly credulous cynicism of adolescence that plays best there. That is why Letterman will beat the rest of them in the late night wars. It is also why "Beavis and Butt-head" on MTV is such a big hit. Even more than the Simpsons, these two sexually and scatologically obsessed animated teenagers embody televisual values, and they do so with a minimum of dramatic fuss. In fact, like the teenagers to whom they appeal, almost all they do is sit and watch music videos and make smart-aleck comments to each other which are greeted with their trademark snuffling laughter. There is a sort of Zen perfection to their inertia that fascinates me. If anything on television has a claim to be art this autumn it is not "NYPD Blue" but "Beavis and Butt-head."



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Books

# Apologies for the ancients

*by John Herington*

If the humanities were not in crisis, threatened from within and without, they would scarcely be the humanities as we have known them since the days of Socrates' Thinkery. This is perhaps too often forgotten in our anxious educational debates. Even so, there is a case for supposing that the late twentieth century is an exceptionally dangerous time for them, and particularly for the Greco-Roman classics that have long been at their core. A pen-stroke by a radically indoctrinated or financially strapped college administration is all that is needed to wipe out a department of classics, and in fact, within the last year, news has come in that some fifty such departments in this country are under threat of extinction. Clearly the time has come for our society to consider very carefully what classical literature is, and how its study can be justified. Neither question is easily answered; but in two new works, *The Norton Book of Classical Literature* and *The Oldest Dead White European Males*, Bernard Knox has heroically confronted both.

The Norton book presents, in translation, specimens of the Greek and Latin authors from Homer to St. Augustine; the specimens are preceded by a literary-historical introduction and are interspersed with Knox's comments and (for the longer books) summaries of omitted matter.[1] Between them the introduction, the specimens, and the comments give a fair idea of the general course of classical literary history. Yet how far a reader (especially a reader coming new to the subject) will be able to obtain a sense of the distinctive qualities of classical literature itself —this is another question altogether. After all, two of the most powerful reasons that the classics have been studied so lovingly for so long, through one politico-cultural crisis after another, are their overall design and their style: that still unsurpassed genius for literary architecture, coupled with that marvelously varied control of language at the level of the phrase and the sentence and a range of poetic meters that has never been matched in any language of the West.

Unfortunately this book contains no major work complete except Sophocles' *Antigone*; everything else is represented only by relatively short extracts. Thus the *Odyssey* here occupies seventy-five pages of extracts, comment, and summary (readers should perhaps be alerted to the fact that the lengthy final extract, though attributed to Book XXIII in the title and the running page headings, is actually an amalgam of XIII and XXIII). The *Aeneid* is given a mere sixty pages, a feat of compression that has been accomplished partly by leaving out the second half of the epic except for the brief reconciliation between Jupiter and Juno at the end of Book XII. One cannot help wondering whether a more effective strategy might have been to include a few master-

1 *The Norton Book of Classical Literature*, edited by Bernard Knox; Norton, 866 pages, $29.95.



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pieces in their entirety, rather than a multitude in snippets. The late-Greek joke comes to mind: an academic, seeking to sell his house, carried around a single stone from it as a sample.

In his comments on Sappho, Knox eloquently and justly characterizes the poet's literary style, speaking of her "unforgettable lines" and of her "inimitable mastery of rhythm, of verbal melody, and of crisp freshness of expression." Similar praise would apply in some degree to all the major classical poets and even (as any sensitive reader of Plato will confirm) to classical prose. To carry these stylistic qualities across into another language is perhaps a rarer gift than is commonly supposed, and the stylistic level of the translations in this anthology is correspondingly uneven. Knox has chosen reasonably well from the available translations of the classics, granted his apparent decision to confine himself to twentieth-century translators (I count only four exceptions to that rule). Certainly some of the translators whose work is represented here —Arrowsmith, for instance, and Fagles, Fitts, Fitzgerald, Lombardo, Martin, Parker, Rayor, and Skelton—are first-rate by the standards of any age, sharing with the reader the liveliness and grace, as well as the substance, of the original Greek or Latin. But our century should not flatter itself too highly on its achievements in this field: disaster areas remain, above all in the translation of prose, where one is reminded all too often of Max Beerbohm's remark, after dipping into a translation of Cicero: "This translator seems to be saying to the reader, 'Look here, this fellow Cicero is just like you and me.' . . . He isn't!"

Yet even in the poetry, even in Sappho herself, there are disappointments. The candid reader is invited to test the following samples by ear, and to judge whether they are not eminently forgettable, deficient as they are in rhythm, verse melody, or crisp freshness of expression.

From Sappho's most famous poem, the prayer to Aphrodite, translated by Richmond Lattimore:

> . . . standing by me rather, if once before now
> far away you heard, when I called upon you,
> left your father's dwelling place and descended,
> yoking the golden
> chariot to sparrows . . .

A fragment of Alcaeus, translated by Willis Barnstone:

> One and all,
> you have proclaimed Pittakos, the lowborn,
> to be tyrant of your lifeless and doomed
> land. Moreover, you deafen him with praise.

The penultimate line of that example illustrates a common practice among the poorer twentieth-century translators from the classics: *when the line looks long enough on the paper, end it and begin a new one*, without respect for rhythm, meter, or rhetoric. A spectacular example in this book is Kenneth Rexroth's translation from Leonidas of Tarentum, one of the great masters of that most concise and melodious of Greek verse-forms, the elegiac epigram:

> Philokles offers his bouncing
> Ball to Hermes, along
> With the other toys of his
> Boyhood, his boxwood rattle,
> The knucklebones he once was
> So crazy about, and his
> Spinning top.

So long as such chopped-up prose is purveyed to the intelligent Common Reader as representing classical poetry, or indeed as poetry at all, we must expect classical studies to be in trouble—if not literary studies in general.

There are two serious imbalances in the book's coverage of classical literature. First, the Greek writers are given far fuller treatment than the Latin writers. Even Cicero is unrepresented, although he is certainly Rome's greatest prose author, and arguably —in certain passages, such as the "Dream of Scipio" at the end of his *Republic*—her greatest prose-poet. Among the many other



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Latin absentees are the comedies of Plautus and Terence, the historical writings of Caesar and Sallust, the entire prose and verse output of Seneca, and the exquisite occasional poetry of Martial. (In his preface Knox says that he has included less Latin than Greek because Latin literature is less translatable than high-classical Greek, being so much more densely textured and allusive. That objection, however, if valid at all, would apply with far more force to Horace and Virgil, whom he has admitted to the book, than to most of the authors just mentioned.) Second, in both Greek and Latin, poetry is greatly preferred to prose. Even the prose writing of the Greeks is very scantily represented. There are relatively short specimens from Herodotus, Thucydides, Plato (in his descriptive, not his dialectical mode), Theophrastus's *Characters*, and Marcus Aurelius. Missing entirely are the orators, Xenophon, Plutarch, Lucian, and the novelists.

Even with these qualifications, however, *The Norton Book of Classical Literature* has much to offer. It makes excellent browsing. Readers who know classical literature fairly well will be introduced to some unfamiliar translations that reveal novel aspects of poems they thought they knew, and will be reminded of half-forgotten splendors. Readers at every level of experience will savor the wit and wisdom of Knox's comments, and profit from them.

The phrase "Dead White European Males," which supplies the ironic title to the other book here under review, [2] is remarkable in that it manages to combine, in four words, three long-recognized sins against political correctness with a fourth that is comparatively new and ill-explored. "White" in this context invites the hearer to racial prejudice, "European" to an interesting variant of patriotic chauvinism, and "Male" to straightforward sexism. Those three epithets, however, apply to mere subsets of humanity. The epithet "Dead," inviting us to reject the work of every human being who has joined the Great Majority, is the really breathtaking one, incalculably widening the scope for late-twentieth-century ideological hatred, and adding, besides, a new horror to the grave.

An innocent might have supposed that DWEM-criticism (as this kind of expurgation may be called for short) would instantly prove self-refuting, so repugnant is it to the moral and political principles of the right, left, and center, and so contrary to common sense anyway: consider what would become of mathematics, say, or astronomy, or comparative philology, if one erased all DWEM contributions to those sciences from the collective memory. But it was of course against the traditional humanities that the criterion was chiefly devised, and it is the humanities that are most in need of a reasoned apologetic to deal with it. The title of this book promises such an apologetic, centering on the Greeks. The foreword and the first of the book's three chapters (all three originated as lectures on various occasions) in fact confront DWEM-criticism directly; the remaining two approach it rather by indirection.

Chapter II, "The Walls of Thebes," traces the fortunes of the humanities backward from now, through the Victorians, through Cicero's magnificent defense of literary studies in his speech for the Greek poet Archias, to the place and time where the great humanistic dialogue began in its full force —to Athens in the time of the Sophists and the great tragedians. Knox justifies the enigmatic title of this chapter most elegantly, by reference to Euripides' fragmentary tragedy *Amphion*. That play was famous in antiquity for its comparison of the strictly practical lifestyle of the farmer or soldier to the intellectual, humanistic lifestyle that had emerged in the fifth-century Athenian enlightenment. In the finale, against all the odds, it seems to have been the "humanist," Amphion, whom the gods chose to raise up the walls of Thebes by the magic of his music. Accepting the moral evidently drawn

2 *The Oldest Dead White European Males and Other Reflections on the Classics*, by Bernard Knox; Norton, 144 pages, $15.95.



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by Euripides, Knox concludes that the most useful citizens of a democracy will be those who have been humanistically trained—those who are familiar through their studies with (here he quotes Matthew Arnold's famous phrase) "the best that has been thought and said."

The third chapter, "The Continuity of Greek Culture," is a lively and charming vision of contemporary Greece through the astounded eyes of a person raised in the strict Anglo-American tradition of classical philology in the first half of the twentieth century. In that tradition, modern Greek and modern Greece alike tended to be viewed with apprehension. (This reviewer recalls a distinguished Oxford Greek scholar who throughout his life refused to visit Greece for fear that it should bedim his mental picture of the classic land; he also recalls a fellow student who, on first looking down at the panorama of medieval and modern Athens from the north wall of the Acropolis, simply remarked, "I should like to drop a *bomb* on this.") With much amusing anecdote, Knox describes the process of his conversion to a deep sympathy with the contemporary Greek landscape, language, and people as natural extensions of the classical Greece on which he was brought up—and as guides to a richer understanding of it. The oldest Europeans, as they appear in this chapter, are very, very far from dead.

Chapter 1, "The Oldest Dead White European Males," takes its start from the drastic revaluation of the ancient Greeks that has taken place since mid-Victorian times, beginning with the late-nineteenth-century anthropologists and reaching its natural culmination with the civil-rights and feminist movements during the Sixties of this century. As a result of that revaluation, a culture that had been represented from the Renaissance onward as the artistic, intellectual, and even in some sense spiritual ancestor of ours is now represented as utterly alien from ours in its practices and attitudes—and therefore to be rejected from our educational curriculum. Knox's response to that position is not, as one might perhaps have expected, to question its logicality (such logic, if pressed, would very soon have us studying nothing and no one but ourselves) but rather to modify its premise, the *otherness* of the ancient Greeks.

The bulk of the chapter is occupied with four real or supposed examples of that otherness. First, Knox surveys their undeniable practice of ritual sacrifice, offering in the process the most graphic and horrific reconstruction of an ancient sacrificial rite that this reviewer has ever read. Second comes an extensive section in which he refutes an idea put forward by the late Bruno Snell, to the effect that the Homeric Greeks differed profoundly from us in psychology, having no concept of the individual soul or consciousness. The refutation is effective, although one cannot help wondering how many contemporaries take Snell's theory very seriously (it seemed improbable to many even at its first appearance forty years ago), and how many DWEM-critics are among them. Third, and very briefly, Knox acknowledges—how could one do otherwise?—the universal practice of slavery among the Greeks. In the last place, he considers the Greek treatment of women. He concedes—as, once again, who cannot?—that practically all the direct historical evidence we have indicates that most Greek women were condemned to domestic seclusion. On the other hand, however, he suggests that the poetry of the Greeks, above all their drama, implies a far deeper sympathy and respect for women than the direct evidence would allow us to suppose. This suggestion is well founded, but it may not in fact amount to a very satisfactory answer to the charge. In the first place, it is by no means clear that sympathy and respect for women was *per se* incompatible with their domestic seclusion, however deplorable the practice was on other grounds. In the second place, one can hardly dispute the plain fact that virtually all the epics and tragedies conclude with their female characters either dead, like Clytemnestra, or safely back in the women's quarters, like Alcestis, or occasion-



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ally, like the Iphigenia who escaped from the Taurians, a chaste priestess in a shrine. Knox adduces Medea as an exception, and indeed she escapes all these fates in the finale of Euripides' play—but at the cost of becoming something more resembling a demon than a woman.

The brief final section of this first chapter turns from the otherness of the Greeks to an enumeration of certain features that link them to modern humanity in Knox's view. Their tragedies can and do arc across the centuries, miraculously, from their culture into ours. The Greeks, like us, had their vegetarians, revolted by animal slaughter; crooks and fools were abundant in their society, just as they are in ours, and were to be found as often as not in their equivalent of our shopping mall, namely the *agora*; and their funeral practices were, after all, scarcely less bizarre than those of us Americans. He adds that the two most blatant faults of the ancient Greeks, the suppression of women and the employment of slaves, were eliminated from Western societies only within the past two centuries.

For the already converted, this chapter can offer much pleasure and instruction, but we have to admit, regretfully, that it is not likely to make much impact on the DWEM-critics. Simply to palliate the ancient Greeks' sins against political correctness is not enough, for it is to fight on the terrain chosen by the opponents. What the present crisis really seems to require is a reaffirmation of the continuing value of what the Greeks thought and said, through all the changes in manners wrought by two millennia. The elements of such a *positive* apologetic are in fact already present both in *The Norton Book of Classical Literature* and in the present book, notably in the foreword and in "The Walls of Thebes." A truly effective case, however, would probably need to rest on a broader base than the poetry and drama of the Greeks. The apologist might dwell on that unique ability to reach for the basics which appears in almost everything the Greeks wrote—not merely in their poetry and their history but in their ethics, metaphysics, mathematics, and rhetoric—and which, even where their solutions in detail have been superseded, can still serve in itself as a stimulus to wider and deeper thought. He or she should not neglect, either, that eighth wonder of the world, the Greek language, taking a hint perhaps from Edward Gibbon's marvelous characterization of it in the last volume of his *Decline and Fall*:

> In their lowest servitude and depression, the subjects of the Byzantine throne were still possessed of a golden key that could unlock the treasures of antiquity; of a musical and prolific language that gives a soul to the objects of sense and a body to the abstractions of philosophy.

# The first "Immortelle"

*Josyane Savigneau*
Marguerite Yourcenar: Inventing a Life.
Translated from the French
by Joan E. Howard.
University of Chicago Press,
527 pages, $25

*reviewed by Maria Louise Ascher*

This meticulously researched book about one of France's most esteemed writers begins with an epigraph from E. M. Cioran: "It is amazing that the prospect of having a biographer has caused no one to abandon the idea of having a life." The sentence captures effectively the peculiar tension that exists between the biographer ("Here I come, ready or not") and his or her subject ("Find me, if you can"), a game of pursuit in which the latter is at a distinct disadvantage. For the dead lack all privacy—especially those who, in life, have had the dubious fortune to be public figures. No matter how carefully you've protected your personal life from the intrusive gaze of the world, once you're safely under the turf, biographers will be going through your mail, reading your diaries, pumping your friends and relatives, poring over your financial records, inter-



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viewing your psychiatrist, ransacking your closets for skeletons.

Marguerite Yourcenar, the first woman elected to the Académie Française and the author of the best-selling novels *Memoirs of Hadrian* and *The Abyss*, sculpted her public persona as deliberately as her prose. She deplored this gossip-hungry age: "I detest what seems to be some kind of pathological excitement on the part of the public about pouncing on a writer's life, as if he or she were not a man or a woman like everyone else." Even her remarkable three-volume autobiography reveals little about her adult life, much of which she spent far off the beaten track, in a small town in Maine. In her final years she burned many of her private papers, and when she died in 1987 she left a will stipulating that much of her remaining correspondence be sealed for half a century—enough time for juicy personal gossip to become dry historical footnote. As if this weren't daunting enough for a biographer, Yourcenar had a serene disregard for chronological accuracy and an inveterate tendency to rewrite her life and her texts. At the time of her death, she had attained the status of a monument in France and had also acquired a large audience in the United States. But few people knew much about her. What was she like, that woman behind the monument? Or rather—since the woman and the monument were one—what was the relation between them?

Josyane Savigneau, editor of the book-review section of *Le Monde*, has taken that relation as her guiding theme in this first full-length account of Yourcenar's life (well translated, and supplemented with helpful notes, by Joan Howard). She prefaces her work with a detailed description of the challenges that Yourcenar poses to biographers, and of her own efforts to establish a balance between the reader's desire to know and the subject's right to privacy. Although she was a friend of Yourcenar's, she does not let this fact blind her to the writer's flaws.

Savigneau's strengths are investigative, not analytic. She brings together material from dozens of interviews and countless hours of archival research; she is somewhat less effective when it comes to interpreting this wealth of raw data. Still, she does a superb job of sorting out fact from fiction, resolving inconsistencies in the record, presenting the contrasts and contradictions in Yourcenar's character, and describing the texture of her daily life, especially in her later years. This is a finely shaded portrait of a singular and complex woman.

Yourcenar was born Marguerite Antoinette Jeanne Marie Ghislaine de Crayencour, in Brussels, on June 8, 1903. Her mother, Fernande, a Belgian, died a week later of peritonitis. Michel de Crayencour, a Frenchman, took his baby daughter back to his family estate near Lille, where she was cared for by nannies and by various of her father's mistresses. She was educated at home, and the fact that she escaped the rigid curriculum and methods of the French school system no doubt partly accounted for her unconventional turn of mind.

Savigneau is excellent in discussing the girl's relationship with her father, probably the most influential figure in her life. His pedagogy consisted of giving her complete freedom to indulge her intellectual tastes—to learn Greek, Latin, and English (they lived in England for a year during World War I), to read the books he himself liked, to question and think deeply about what she read. He aided her with her fledgling writing projects; helped her rearrange the letters of her family name into an exotic-sounding pseudonym (a name "that calls to mind faraway unknown places—that strikes one as the very sign of something strange," as Savigneau says); and published her first book of verse at his own expense. "Perpetually absent without leave" is the phrase Yourcenar used to describe him—and this applied not only to his conduct during World War I but also to his general defiance of bourgeois mores. He gambled away the family fortune, and died just as Yourcenar was about to publish her first novel, *Alexis*, which would win her critical acclaim at the age of twenty-six.



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Until she was in her late thirties, Yourcenar led the frugal life of a nomadic intellectual, frequenting Paris, Lausanne, Vienna, Rome, Belgrade, Athens, New York, and other cities in Europe and the United States. Her output was varied: small, carefully composed novels (with correspondingly small sales), plays, verse, prose poems, essays, stories, and translations of Henry James and Virginia Woolf. Savigneau gives us a remarkable account of a meeting with the latter, including Yourcenar's comments on Woolf ("at once sparkling and timid") and a Woolf's-eye view of Yourcenar: "she wore some nice gold leaves on her black dress; is a woman I suppose with a past; amorous; intellectual; lives half the year in Athens; . . . red-lipped, strenuous; a working Frenchwoman."

She was indeed a "woman with a past." In her twenties and thirties she affected a striking, masculine style of dress and engaged in numerous love affairs with both men and women: "she liked to seduce," Savigneau tells us—to exert her power over others via her sensuality. (She always disliked the word "sexuality"—too "clinical," she claimed.)

Concerning the works that Yourcenar published during this period, Savigneau's evaluations go no further than the obvious: Yourcenar's poetry was "more akin to exercises in versified composition"; a certain essay was "mediocre." But she acknowledges her lack of specialized knowledge here, and compensates for it by including assessments by professional critics. Yourcenar's dense, layered, psychologically incisive texts have evoked comparisons with Gide, Rilke, Benjamin Constant, Proust, Schnitzler, and Racine. Her prose has an almost marmoreal quality—smooth and precise, like a Roman inscription. Many critics praised her cerebral, abstract style (which in those days was frequently characterized as "masculine," "virile") and her unique voice. "The voice is low and deep, and soft of modulation," wrote the eminent critic Edmond Jaloux about *Alexis*. "It is tender and harsh at the same time, . . . stirring feelings in us that only great writers have so thoroughly aroused, making itself heard, amid the din of contemporary literature, with all the assurance of its highly pure tone." Others were not seduced. Angelo Rinaldi, reviewing a collection of stories entitled *Three Lives and a Dream*, criticized her "taste for the highly wrought story," her "starchy formality when it comes to the expression of feelings," her "knack for sculpting noble bas-reliefs in unctuous Marseilles soap." Certainly she used this formal, abstract style to create unusual resonances, in conjunction with her disturbing themes: betrayal, incest, fascism, sado-masochism, suicide.

Savigneau's book is, in fact, most interesting when it deals with the contrasts in Yourcenar's work and character. Yourcenar could be charming, generous, compassionate, thoughtful, tolerant, loyal; she could also be stubborn, quarrelsome, vengeful, imperious, and insular (one of Savigneau's favorite words for her is "autarchical"). Notwithstanding the "nobility" of her published prose, she could be petty and even downright vitriolic in her letters. Some of her most potent barbs were aimed at unappreciative critics, such as Guy Dupré: "Slipping on spit is a slight occupational hazard; still, one has the right to feel a healthy mistrust when the spit comes from a man who started out by showering you with obsequious praise." The remark is delightfully nasty and graphic—and has an unmistakable structural elegance.

Yourcenar always hated to expose her private side; after one interview with the French journalist Matthieu Galey, she regretted her frankness, saying she felt as if she had taken all her clothes off. Savigneau's book reveals many hidden facets: Yourcenar, in her youth, was fascinated by night life and red-light districts; she had an affinity for violence, which sometimes led her into physically abusive relationships; she carried on lengthy lawsuits with her publishers; she both scorned and craved the esteem of the French literary establishment; and contrary to the assurance and even haughtiness she projected in later life, she suffered long periods of self-doubt and discouragement



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early in her career. She fell into a severe depression during the World War II years, and Savigneau insightfully observes that her decision to write plays at that time may well have been a function of her flagging confidence: "Writing dialogue was therapeutic . . . It spared her from calling on an 'I' she was no longer sure of."

In 1937 Yourcenar met Grace Frick, an American academic almost precisely her age. They quickly fell in love, and in 1939, as Europe was mobilizing for war, Yourcenar came to the United States to live with Frick. For eight years, beginning in 1942, Yourcenar taught French literature and civilization at Sarah Lawrence College. Savigneau interviewed a number of her former students and colleagues, many of whom noted that Yourcenar had a quality of seeming not quite of the here and now. "I couldn't imagine her tending to the tasks of everyday life, using a toaster or a hair dryer," observed a former student; "I had the vague notion, when I was taking her courses, that she must use medieval instruments in her daily life."

In 1947 Yourcenar became an American citizen, and in 1950 she and Grace Frick bought a small house in Northeast Harbor, on Mount Desert Island, Maine. For the next three decades they shared a life of work, travel, and domestic routine. Savigneau is here at her best: she admires Frick, shows a fine understanding of her attachment to Yourcenar, and beautifully evokes the atmosphere of their home ("that closed, soft, and somewhat static place"), which they named Petite Plaisance. Her portrait of their "marriage" is infinitely nuanced and often surprising. We learn, for example, that Yourcenar had a curious streak of passivity in her nature. It was Frick who persuaded her to live in the United States and who managed the details of their shared life. She also aided with research and proofreading, and translated many of Yourcenar's works.

Yourcenar never moved back to France. But she missed her native language and culture, made little effort to get to know her neighbors, and found the gray Maine winters unutterably boring. Like a true nomad, she always spoke of Petite Plaisance as a "base," and thought of Northeast Harbor not as "the United States" but merely as "a bit of country" where she owned a cottage and to which she retired periodically to write. Much of each year she spent abroad.

During those three decades, Yourcenar's literary reputation was steadily growing. In 1979, even as Frick was losing a long battle with cancer, Yourcenar was being suggested as a suitable candidate for the Académie Française. This august institution consists of forty members, known as the "Immortals," who are elected from among France's most respected literary and cultural figures. Since the Académie's founding in 1635, the members had all been men. Savigneau's account of the controversy over Yourcenar's nomination is itself worth the price of the book. A number of the academicians were outraged at the idea that any woman should be elected, much less one who was a lesbian and, worse, an American citizen. She was the subject of crude jokes regarding her sexual preferences, scurrilous rumors accusing her of anti-Semitism, absurd remarks about how she would look in the Académie's ceremonial garb (a Napoleonic military-style uniform, with sword and cocked hat) and how she would upset its rituals and protocols. Claude Lévi-Strauss was ardently opposed to her candidacy, because "you don't change the rules of the tribe." Jean Dutourd said that she had read too much to be a good writer. And so on.

Yourcenar herself kept above the fray. "They're a bunch of aging little boys," she sniffed. But in 1980, thanks to the strenuous efforts of her supporters, Yourcenar's French citizenship was renewed and she was elected as the first female academician. Yves Saint-Laurent designed a ceremonial costume for her (an elegant black velvet cloak), and the Académie adjusted its procedures to accommodate a female member. Not that this made much difference to her: after the induction ceremony, she never attended another meeting.

Yourcenar was accompanied at that cere-



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mony and on her subsequent travels by a young man whom she had met just before Grace Frick's death in 1979 and who became the last great love of her life: an American named Jerry Wilson. Yourcenar was transformed by their relationship. He revived her interest in life and enabled her to resume her travels, which had been discontinued during Frick's long illness. The feelings of Wilson, who was gay, are harder to gauge. For five years they traveled together, shared each other's lives. But "neither one of them was what might properly be called 'good-natured,'" says Savigneau. Wilson had a weakness for alcohol; when he drank, he became abusive. Yourcenar reacted calmly: "I think back on it at night and I'm surprised by the unconscious choice that has caused me several times to attach myself to beings of an intransigence and violence that suddenly tear through the fabric of a peaceful life together . . . One accepts people as they are."

Savigneau is a good deal more cautious in her account of Yourcenar and Wilson than she is in discussing Yourcenar and Frick. She tells us almost nothing about Wilson's background. Perhaps her reticence stems from consideration for Wilson's family; perhaps she is simply uncomfortable in the face of this "strange relationship." She also makes an intriguing remark about possible similarities between Grace Frick and Jerry Wilson, but fails to develop this point. Throughout the book she has shied away from "immoderate psychoanalytic interpretation"; here she seems more reluctant than usual to venture any comments.

This counterintuitive relationship, which seemed to reverse so much of the conventional order of things, ended with a reversal: Jerry Wilson contracted AIDS; he died in 1986. At the time of his death, Yourcenar herself was recovering from a heart attack. The following year she had a stroke, and died on December 17. Her ashes were interred in a little cemetery on Mount Desert Island. Not a single representative from the Académie Française attended the memorial service.

We reach the end of Savigneau's account with the feeling that we have enjoyed a long and satisfying acquaintance with a remarkable person—a feeling that the finest biographies always give us. Savigneau's diligence, fairness, and tact win our sympathy both for her and for her subject. Aside from a penchant for proleptic clichés of the "little did she know what was to come" variety, she writes extremely well, and seems to have learned a thing or two from Yourcenar herself. For example, she begins her account by evoking, in a brief passage, the deaths of the three major figures in Yourcenar's life: her father, Grace Frick, and Jerry Wilson—deaths which spanned nearly six decades. It's a thoroughly Yourcenarian device, compressing and traversing great swaths of time via the quicksilver links of memory and association. The reader is thus led into Yourcenar's life by means of one of her own favorite narrative methods.

Savigneau is also superb at reading nonverbal evidence—images, photographs, symbolic notations, facial expressions, absences, silences. In a moving passage, she observes the fading of Frick and Yourcenar's love, as revealed in Frick's daybooks over the years: "The entries grew more and more factual and terse, . . . the signs (crosses and suns) marking happiness, tenderness, love, and the joy of being together disappeared almost totally, and forever, as though, after the love story, there came what their friends from the Fifties and Sixties described as a 'marriage of convenience.'"

One wishes that there had been more such passages in the book; also that Yourcenar the literary artist had been given more attention. Savigneau describes the fabric of her daily life in great detail. But how did Yourcenar's creative genius grow and flower in this context? Savigneau sometimes becomes immersed in minutiae. Granted, she explicitly delimits her aim: all she wants to do is "retrace the itinerary" of this woman who "rewrote her life endlessly"—untangle the threads of fact from the welter of obscurities, contradictions, rumors, and misconceptions. She illuminates the relation be-



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tween the woman and the public persona, and shows how much deliberate shaping was devoted to the latter; but we get little sense of the woman who created, and whose creations in turn made her Marguerite Yourcenar.

Savigneau says modestly in her introduction that she makes no "attempt to analyze or comment on the work itself," seeking only "to propose certain avenues of inquiry" and merely "sketching" a "silhouette." Of course, her portrait is immensely richer than that, and in a way it seems churlish to ask for more when she has given us so much. Yet as Borges said, in a remark that haunted Yourcenar, "A writer thinks he's talking about many things, but what he leaves behind, if he's lucky, is an image of himself." Any fully rounded portrait of Yourcenar must thus include a consideration of her works—not in the simple-minded sense of using the works to illuminate the life, but in order to explore the development and maturation of one of the foremost literary talents of our century. Such a critical biography remains to be written. In the meantime, we have Savigneau's scrupulous, sensitive, and highly readable account—the chronicle of a remarkable act of self-invention.

# Agee & after

*Alma Neuman*
Always Straight Ahead: A Memoir.
Louisiana State University Press,
165 pages, $24.95

*reviewed by James R. Mellow*

In 1937, Alma Neuman (born Mailman) was caught up in a headlong affair with James Agee, the poet, novelist, and staff writer for *Fortune* magazine. Both were living in Greenwich Village at the time. She was twenty-five, the attractive daughter of a Utica jeweler, a talented violinist and sometime writer who had not yet found her direction in life. Agee, twenty-eight, was lanky, handsome, restive—and married to Neuman's good friend Olivia Saunders. It was only one of the wayward circumstances that characterized her affair with Agee and their subsequent marriage, which began on December 6, 1938.

Agee, already a writer with a burgeoning reputation, was in the throes of writing what would become a literary classic of the Depression era, *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, his brilliant, idiosyncratic text on the bleak lives of three sharecropper families in Hale County, Alabama. It was accompanied by Walker Evans's riveting, no-nonsense pictures of the Burroughs, Tingle, and Fields families and their hardscrabble existence, the harvest of poverty in the rural South. Ironically, with the onset of World War II, the photographs that were topical when taken at the height of the Depression in the summer of 1936 had already begun to settle into history by the time the book was published in 1941.

By then, too, the marriage between Agee and Neuman had also become history. According to Neuman's fresh and frank memoir, *Always Straight Ahead*, Agee, who took an experimental approach to marriage, had once urged his reluctant wife and his equally reluctant best friend, Evans, to take part in a sexual threesome that, within five minutes, left him shaken and sobbing in a chair while his wife and friend went hurriedly in search of their clothes. Neuman diagnosed Agee's unexpected reaction as a case of love, jealousy, despair, self-hatred—"and possibly, knowing Jim, a generalized world grief." Not long after, when she was pregnant with her first child, Agee, still in pursuit of love overflowing, began a serious affair with another young woman, hoping that Alma would accept the situation as a way of life. But by 1941, Neuman, having had enough of the domestic turmoil, was living in Mexico with their son, Joel, and a new lover whom she later married, Bodo Uhse, a German writer and Communist then living in exile from Hitler's Germany. When she received her copy of *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, it carried a poetic inscription from *Hamlet* by way of Agee the incurable literary romantic:



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"Nymph, in thy orisons be all my sins remembered."

*Always Straight Ahead* is an intimate and candid book, written, one imagines, with the painful honesty of later reflection, all passion spent. Its title derives from one of Neuman's self-assessments, what she terms her "lifelong tendency to forge ahead, without much thought, to take chances and risks in a kind of intuitive belief in a satisfactory outcome." For many readers the most intriguing portion will be Neuman's record of the passionate and unpredictable marriage to Agee, but the book is important also for the sidelights it sheds on some of the notable artistic figures of the Thirties and the postwar years: the photographers Walker Evans and Helen Levitt, the ubiquitous Chilean poet Pablo Neruda, and the Mexican muralists Diego Rivera and José Clemente Orozco, whom Neuman met in Mexico, where she worked in a vanguard art gallery.

There are wry episodes: Neuman's account of the ferocious sibling rivalry she felt toward her brother Ernest, four years younger, whom, as a child, she hoped to annihilate. ("Why not give him some old razor blades to play with?" she once suggested to her astonished father.) There are poignant moments: a visit, with Agee, to one of the sharecropper families in Alabama when a young daughter, wearing a dress made from a flour sack, shyly brought out her treasures in a matchbox: a piece of colored glass, part of a tin toy, a broken segment from a dime-store necklace. There are personal regrets —her neglect of her own talents as a musician, though she does not dwell on it in self-pity. She confesses to her moments of vanity and to the self-centeredness of her early bohemian life. She notes, for instance, her youthful lack of interest, as a Jew, in the fate of Jews in Europe, more concerned as she was in being accepted in the WASP society of upstate New York. Neuman recounts a life lived fully, even daringly, apportioning the blame evenly for the failure of her three marriages, the last to an American about whom she says little. She makes few apologies. Yet, for all the candor of her memoir, it is difficult to characterize her exactly. There is something elusive, it seems, about a life of forging ahead, trusting to intuition.

One of the more valuable and engrossing segments of the book is Neuman's sobering account of the twelve years she spent in East Germany with Bodo Uhse and her sons Joel and Stefan (her child by Uhse) just after World II. She writes of it as a society divided between the working class and the professionals—the writers, artists, engineers, and doctors of the Communist elite whom she knew in Berlin. The middle class, she maintains, was gradually defecting to the West. As the wife of a respected Communist writer, she was aware that her situation was privileged, better than that of the ordinary worker: "The magic words Frau Uhse seemed to open doors automatically." But she was alert to the dislike East German workers felt toward the intelligentsia. She is critical of what she describes as the United States effort to subvert the economic success of the eastern bloc countries, but even more critical of the failures of Marxism, which tended to be written off, by her husband and others, as "the birth pains of socialism." She questioned the trials of friends and acquaintances whom she knew as dedicated Communists and whom she doubted were guilty of the "imperialist crimes" for which they were imprisoned or executed. She chronicles the effects that Khrushchev's revelations of the Stalinist terror and the brutal suppression of the 1956 Hungarian uprising had in her circle of friends, who nevertheless clung to the faith. Her husband, she reveals, fearing a takeover from the West or an uprising from within because of the Hungarian situation, had stored away a cache of ether, planning to kill her and the children and himself if the worst occurred. But in the end, it was not politics but the failure of her second marriage and the precarious health of her son Stefan that brought her back to America.

Life has a strange way of circling back. Neuman's memoir, a record of scattered



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happiness and remembered sins, was written, in part, as a response to a letter that James Agee had written her in 1953, two years before he died. Agee never sent the letter; Neuman received it some twenty-five years later, by way of a perfect stranger. It came at a bad time. Her son Stefan had ended his troubled life on his second attempt at suicide; her husband William Neuman had died, suddenly, five months later. In the letter, Agee, a ghost from the past, professed his love: "I am still in love with you, Alma. This is different from adding 'I always will be.' I don't know or care whether I always will be—but I know I still am." Neuman died in 1988. Her memoir was edited by her son Joel.

# Wunderkind

*Frank Conroy* Body & Soul. Houghton Mifflin/Seymour Lawrence, 450 pages, $24.95

*reviewed by David Klinghoffer*

Perhaps because there are few real ones around, America is currently preoccupied by geniuses. Nowhere is this clearer than in our written culture, which abounds with them, creating a new class of celebrities. A physicist with a terrible disease writes a book which, although few people read it, nevertheless becomes a best-seller owing to his compelling personal status: the crippled genius. *Genius: The Life and Science of Richard Feynman* goes the title of another best-seller, followed in the bookstores by *Genius in the Shadows: A Biography of Leo Szilard, the Man Behind the Bomb*. Geniuses are especially common in feature journalism. Until recently, every other issue of *The New York Times Magazine* seemed to contain a profile of some individual of extreme brilliance—the "Genius of the Week," a friend of mine called this feature. In a specially queasy profile of Susan Sontag last year, the interviewer couldn't stop mentioning the "rigorous and pure intellect" and "enormous intelligence" of Miss Sontag, her ex-husband, even her sister Judith, "who is also extremely intelligent."

You know you are reading about a genius when, at the start of the customary biographical sketch halfway through the article, it is noted with awe what a voracious reader the subject was as a child. ("'I would read anything, absolutely anything,' recalls Smith. 'If I was eating breakfast cereal, I'd read the label and memorize the ingredients.'") In *Body & Soul*—hotly awaited, since the author has published only one other book since his first in 1967—Frank Conroy has written a genius novel, sort of like an extended feature profile, following a brilliant pianist from his youth in the 1940s to young manhood in the Sixties. We guess this when we are informed that the protagonist, Claude Rawlings, is at six years old a voracious reader.

Claude, who lives in the less nice part of the Upper East Side, has struck up a friendship with Mr. Weisfeld, the owner of a music store on Third Avenue. Claude wants to learn how to play the piano. Mr. Weisfeld hands him a book of lessons for beginners. "Can you read?" Weisfeld asks. "Words, I mean." "I can read. I read all the time," Claude answers. "The newspaper. Sometimes she [his mother] brings home *Life* magazine or *Reader's Digest*. I read books, too. . . . I could read when I was four."

An early and intense love of film is, according to the rules of the genre, another sign of nascent genius. This is because geniuses experience life to an exquisite degree that the rest of us, like the feature journalist, can only admire and applaud. So a great deal of attention is paid to Claude's sensitivity. Whenever he goes to the movies we get descriptions of how seized he is by what happens on the screen, while all the dopes around him don't get it: "Aware of the hisses and catcalls from the remote children's section, hearing the snores of the fat man asleep in the next row, he nevertheless soared, flying out of himself towards the unbearable beauty of the kiss. When the



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images faded he would cover his face, as if to keep them a moment longer."

As Claude the movie-hound quickly proves himself a gifted musician, our expectations are confirmed. "His mind was hot with music," Conroy writes, "and he did not think at all until it began to cool down." Claude's father is said to have disappeared during the Second World War, and his mother, a tough-talking cab driver, offers little encouragement to her son, so it is left to Weisfeld to provide Claude a musical education. He introduces Claude to "the maestro," a mysterious and rich man in a big apartment on Park Avenue, who allows Claude to practice on his fancy piano. Claude is spoken of as "the wunderkind." After the maestro dies, leaving Claude his piano and enough money to cover lessons with the most brilliant piano teachers in the metropolitan area, Claude's powers increase. He gains entry into an exclusive East Side prep school, where he gets to be pals with another genius, a British boy with a photographic memory. ("An extremely bright young man," Weisfeld will later observe. "Off to Cambridge, I'm afraid. Cambridge Cambridge.")

Claude also blooms as a composer of—um, genius. (Weisfeld: "I wish the maestro was here for this. He would have—. . . Listen, Claude. This is brilliant. I'm not kidding you. Brilliant.") Claude's fortunes are overseen by Weisfeld and the attorney who administers the maestro's estate. As a performer, Claude receives his first big break at a concert he gives at a festival in Massachusetts. But his career really takes off when he is invited to tour with a famous Italian musician named Frescobaldi, "one of the finest violinists in Europe." With so many geniuses milling around, it comes as no surprise when, late in the book, it is revealed that before fleeing the Nazis, Mr. Weisfeld was "the best young composer in Poland."

Just as the reality of the features page is different from our own, the reality of New York City is different in *Body & Soul* from the New York City we know. On the features page there are no individual human beings, but types: the Reluctant Celebrity, the Wise Homeless Woman, the Brave Artist with AIDS, the Cantankerous Local Man with an Amusing Hobby. In Conroy's novel, Claude consorts with Al, a Saintly Black Man of the sort so often found in TV movies, who befriends him and eventually cohabits with his mother. ("I'm angry," says Al. "I just don't give in to it.") Claude's mentor, Aaron Weisfeld, is a Stoic Holocaust Survivor. ("Aaron can be very stubborn, you know. Very proud.") A number of other associates are Old Broadway Jewish Guys, the kind who employ a specialized grammar requiring that the main verb always be the last word in the sentence (e.g., "The *tsuris* I had on that record contract you wouldn't believe").

Encountering these characters made me think of traveling in certain parts of Europe, where if you ask the locals what they do for a living, you generally get back one of a limited number of weirdly generic answers—"a student at the university," "a worker at the factory," or (very popular in the former Soviet Union) "an electrical engineer." Something like this stale, unreal atmosphere keeps seeping into Conroy's novel, and distinguishes it from his earlier work, particularly his first book, *Stop-Time*.

In writing about a precocious youth with a missing or otherwise problematic father, growing up on the not-quite-mean streets of Manhattan's East Side, Conroy sticks close to territory well known to him. The title story of his one other book of fiction, a collection called *Midair* (1985), was a quite moving account of a sensitive six-year-old boy living on East Seventh Street, whose crazy father escapes from a rest home and menaces the boy and his sister. The memory haunts him through the years until he is able to redeem himself in middle age, and wipe clear his feeling of shame, by coming to the aid of a young man terrified of dying. That book consisted of stories Conroy had written mostly during the Seventies for *The New Yorker*. *Stop-Time* chronicled Conroy's own youth as a precocious kid raised by his Danish mother in Florida and on East



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Eighty-first Street, while his father was confined to a series of rest homes.

But autobiographical matter in literary books, like chewing gum chewed for too long, tends to lose its flavor. *Stop-Time* was an extremely flavorful book. It contained no geniuses, but neither did it contain any ordinary people. Poor people, yes. In Florida, young Frank mixes with some very funny white-trash types, including a family headed by a vastly overweight woman and her frequently soused husband. Frank visits them one afternoon and finds the father sitting in a deck-chair outside the front door of the family shack: "I stood before him for a moment, waiting for him to speak. It was a tradition and he got annoyed if you didn't honor it. Having seen him mean drunk on more than one occasion, I always did. (The quietest thirteen-year-old boy in the world is the boy who finds a raving, half-blind, red-necked, out-of-work hillbilly house-painter between himself and the door.)"

This is Conroy's tone throughout *Stop-Time*: distant, wryly amused. It works wonderfully. Other, less talented writers believe they introduce novelty into their work by presenting us with "eccentrics"—characters whose crotchets are as familiar from other mediocre fiction as they are maddeningly tedious. The characters in *Stop-Time* share a kind of heightened reality; there is nothing the least bit vague, bland, or hackneyed about them. Conroy doesn't push them on us, either, by insistently reminding us how odd they are. He steps back. My favorite is Frank's stepfather, a man with a bizarrely reductive theory for every occasion: "Half his life had been spent wandering like some profane messiah telling people not to eat white bread and they had gone right on doing it. He had a certain good-natured stoicism in those days." The flavor goes out somewhat in Conroy's fiction from the Seventies and Eighties. By 1993, given copies of *Body & Soul* and *Stop-Time*, each with the author's name erased, you might not guess they were by the same man.

Still, *Body & Soul* is not without its virtues. It reads fast, and even if certain of Conroy's characters seem stale, there is some appealing and genuinely fresh enthusiasm here—for music, especially. When Conroy writes about Claude's experience as a performer, he can at times capture some measure of the joy of listening to good music; after reading a couple such passages, I felt tempted to go to my local record store and buy new CDs. Conroy is at his best writing about enthusiasm and joy—of certain kinds. A high point of the book is the night Claude loses his virginity. The next morning, a woman friend takes one look at him—"the slow smile . . . appearing on his slightly swollen lips"—and knows what has happened.

It's just that Conroy's power to convey such feelings doesn't compare to his power in *Stop-Time*, a book that was primarily about the feelings of an "ordinary" little kid. The passions that stir this boy—riding bumper-cars, getting really good at working a yo-yo, peeking through girls' windows at bedtime—grab the reader in a way that Claude's noble sentiments about Mozart just don't. The boy, of course, was Frank Conroy. *Stop-Time* concludes with the author still a young man. For his next book, he should pick up his memoirs where he left off.

# Shorter notices

*Susan Sontag* Alice in Bed:
A Play in Eight Scenes.
Noonday/Farrar, Straus & Giroux,
117 pages, $25; $10 paper

Susan Sontag has sounded off in many genres on diverse subjects, so it is not surprising to find her essaying the stage as well. *Alice in Bed* is, as she tells us in a postface, the conflation of her vision of Alice James, the gifted but neurasthenic younger sister of William and Henry, with her notion of Lewis Carroll's Alice. The two have nothing in common except their first name and their century. But a determined conflator is undeflatable: had Miss Sontag chosen to meld Edith Sitwell and Edith Cavell, they would have proved equally miscible.



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In most of the play's eight scenes, Alice James lounges in the London of 1890 on a variable number of mattresses. Again and again a male and a female attendant come in to add or subtract from the one to ten mattresses Alice lies on or under. This presumably corresponds to the other Alice's changes in size. Sometimes there is a nurse around for Alice to incoherently debate with about whether she can, shall, could, should get up or not. Sometimes she actually does rise. But then she talks a lot about falling into a hole, which corresponds to the other Alice's celebrated leporine catabasis. The set, too, undergoes some meaningless permutations, though it remains Alice's bedroom.

Scene 3 is a memory flashback to twenty years before, with young Alice standing in her father's library to seek permission from Father to commit suicide. (When he reluctantly granted her wish, Alice crumped out —an interesting fact that Miss Sontag relegates, along with all other interesting facts, to the postface.)

In Scene 4, brother Henry sits at Alice's bedside, and she informs him that she would smoke opium if she could, because "Dead fish have to swim!" Harry and Alice take turns quoting from her writings, as mattresses are added or removed.

There follows the mad-tea-party scene, where Emily Dickinson, Margaret Fuller, *Parsifal*'s Kundry, and *Giselle*'s Myrtha appear to Alice, and everyone talks past everyone else in something midway between parody and gibberish. Margaret and Alice smoke opium. Alice tells Emily, "I think your interest in death is more interesting than mine." Alice's mother appears, and adds her farthing's worth of opacity: "I can't say I'm observing it but I'm not ignoring it either." We don't know what *it* is, and find scant consolation in Alice's statement that she doesn't mean anything she says. Kundry, meanwhile, keeps sleeping or muttering about wanting to sleep. Margaret wishes Alice to turn *it* upside down, with still no clue to *its* identity. Emily declares "Cheerfully is a lovely, lethal word," and, more profoundly, "One would prefer to look behind at a pain than to see it coming," with impeccable logic but dubious syntax. Myrtha dances around and advises, "Just move."

We are treated next to Alice's long soliloquy (Scene 6) about going to Rome—in the mind, of course: "I come to see Rome, it doesn't come to see me. It can't move." The stones of Rome remind Alice of the lump in her breast—the cancer that carried her off at forty-three. She concludes: "I won't say how big or how small anything is. My mind doesn't have a size. One size fits all." That unfunny anachronism ends a scene whose purpose is to exhibit Miss Sontag's knowledge of Rome, just as the previous one displayed her knowledge of opera and ballet.

Scene 7 has a young Cockney burglar (or he may be Irish, the author informs us) enter from the balcony. To his dismay, Alice wakes up, and helps him steal more than he would have found on his own. He speaks an elucubrated lingo sometimes featuring double negatives ("You don't have to do nothin' but lie here"), sometimes not ("I won't let ya get at me anymore"). Leaving with the loot, he expresses sorrow about Alice's illness. She wishes he'd do something better with his "horrid energies."

In the last scene, the Nurse plays the piano for Alice—either scales or fragments from *Parsifal*—and Alice enunciates her wish to be a little larger. The play ends with: "ALICE: I used to be a real person or different. I tried. I feel as if I fell. NURSE: I'll catch you. ALICE: Let me fall asleep. Let me wake up. Let me fall asleep. NURSE: You will."

In the postface, Miss Sontag explains that though *Alice in Bed* took only two weeks to write, she thinks she has been preparing to write it all her life. It is "about the grief and anger of women," and the "prison" and "triumphs" of the imagination. But, she concludes, "the victories of the imagination are not enough." True, though reading this play one can't help feeling that the fiascoes have even less to offer. Karl Kraus observed, "There are two kinds of writers. . . . Those whose content and form belong together like soul and body, and those whose content and form fit together like body and clothes."



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Even he never foresaw a combination of clothes rack and clothes. Thus far, *Alice in Bed* has enjoyed only two mountings in Germany; an American or Bosnian production has yet to be announced.

—*John Simon*

*Miranda Seymour*
Ottoline Morrell: Life on the Grand Scale.
Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 452 pages, $30

Miranda Seymour has given us an admirably straightforward life of the most famous blue-blooded bohemian of them all. Seymour is gradually able, through the accretion of much detail, to make a whole person out of the contradictory Lady Ottoline Morrell. Seymour's subject was, on the one hand, a fervent Christian and lifelong teetotaler, and, on the other hand, an avant-garde aesthete and adultress who often shirked her duties as a mother.

One thing that ties the Victorian and wild Romantic strains together is that Lady Ottoline seldom enjoyed sex with the succession of men she admitted to her bed. She was seeking a high-minded intellectual and spiritual union, and beaux like the priapic Bertrand Russell were kept on what was, for them, practically starvation rations.

Lady Ottoline was the half-Irish half-sister of a duke, and in her veins flowed the blood of the Hapsburgs. This interesting lineage produced a tall, rebellious, red-headed beauty who would show up at the Asquiths' wearing "a feathered turban and green silk trousers to show off her uncommonly long legs." An open-hearted sympathizer with scruffy painters, poets, war refugees, and other misfits, Lady Ottoline generously encouraged —and was later mocked by—the likes of Lytton Strachey, Henry Lamb, D. H. Lawrence, and Aldous Huxley.

The biographer is at pains to show that this well-read and intelligent patroness did not deserve to be lampooned as Lawrence's Hermione Roddice (*Women in Love*) or Osbert Sitwell's Lady Septugesima Goodley (*Triple Fugue*). Certain aspects of her life, however, cannot but strike the reader as silly. Her husband, Philip Morrell, for instance, was a model cuckold who always took care to see that Russell had especially comfortable accommodations at Garsington, the Oxfordshire estate where the Morrells ran an agricultural colony for intellectuals who shared their vocal opposition to the Great War. Lady Ottoline later professed herself deeply shocked to discover that Philip carried on extramarital affairs of his own.

Like other aristocrats presumed to have lots of money (money that in her case never materialized), Lady Ottoline lived her life blithely unaware of any inconsistencies in her conduct. One finds oneself alternately appalled by her arrogance (since Russell wanted to become a father, he and Lady Ottoline searched, just as today's Prince Charles and his married lover did, for a suitable young thing to serve as brood mare) and admiring of her regal self-possession.

She needed every ounce of that self-possession to endure the poisonous ingratitude of her friends from the Bloomsbury group of writers. For all her foibles, Lady Ottoline comes off as a much better person than Strachey and company. The so-called sophisticates of Bloomsbury are shown here to be middle-class prigs who ridiculed Lady Ottoline for her unconventionality. Their supposed addiction to total honesty is also revealed as a sham: they would express warm gratitude to Lady Ottoline for being included in her glittering social life, meanwhile complaining to one another how stupid and boring were the Morrell gatherings and how buffoon-like their hostess.

Apparently only Virginia Woolf came to admit how shabbily Bloomsbury had treated Lady Ottoline Morrell. Woolf, writing to someone about the day that Lady Ottoline introduced her to W. B. Yeats and Walter de la Mare, was struck by her hostess's intellectual seriousness and lack of pomposity. "I saw in a flash all I admire her for; and think what people overlook . . . Since Helen of Troy I don't think any woman can have launched so many ships."

—*Lauren Weiner*



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Notebook

# Mesmer revisited: Bill Moyers & New Age healing

*by Gerald Weissmann*

In "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Napoleon," Karl Marx famously wrote that "Hegel remarks somewhere that all facts and personages of great importance in world history occur, as it were, twice. He forgot to add: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce." Nowadays, history repeats itself as a middlebrow package: the TV mini-series with its "tie-in" book. Bill Moyers's *Healing and the Mind* is a model of the genre.[1] The tie-in rests safely near the top of the *Times* best-seller list (twenty-four weeks as I write), not far beneath a Jungian analyst's *Women Who Run With the Wolves* (fifty-one weeks) and Rush Limbaugh's *The Way Things Ought to Be* (forty-six weeks).

Moyers's volume is more a product than a book; in years past, one called these volumes "ooks." It has been edited by Betty Sue Flowers, a poet and professor of English at the University of Texas, who previously helped Moyers with the tie-in to his series on Joseph Campbell, *The Power of Myth*. In an introductory note, she thanks Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis, one of her heroes, for "vision and encouragement." Moyers thanks the Fetzer Institute, as well he might. Since many of the doctors and scientists he interviewed were supported by the John E. Fetzer Institute, as was the series itself, one anticipates a congruence of views.

The book consists of a series of interviews with fifteen well-respected doctors and scientists who are united in the belief that the conventional medicine of penicillin and polio vaccines has too long denied that the mind can heal the body. Those interviewed include proponents of traditional Chinese medicine, relaxation and meditation practitioners, imaging and stress-reduction specialists, group therapists, psychoimmunologists, general internists, behavioral pediatricians, and some laboratory scientists. Most direct, or work at, "centers" and "institutes." Some of these are also reputable. On the whole, the doctors are rational, devoted, intelligent, and Moyers elicits their views in the cozy, undemanding style of a network that specializes in prime-time nature study. When the more self-referent of these healers become extravagant or grandiose in their claims, he makes sure that they err in the direction of Jeffrey Masson and not of David Koresh. A tone of sweetness and light dominates the conversation. Amiably, these folks agree without dissent that the kind of scientific medicine we practice at American teaching hospitals like Bellevue is suddenly inadequate to the needs of a New Age.

The physical aspects of this book reflect this attitude. The volume comes profusely illustrated by what appear to be randomly chosen images drawn from the world repertoire of anxious art. As might be expected from such a volume, the index of which has twelve references to "empowerment" and thirteen to "herbal medicine" but not one to

1 *Healing and the Mind*, by Bill Moyers; Doubleday, 369 pages, $25.



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"science" or "physiology," the sampling offered of the fine arts is similarly weighted in favor of the occult.

I count seventy-one paintings, drawings, and sculptures of the Surrealist or Symbolist persuasion. The works of Lucas Samaras, Morris Graves, Carlos Castaneda, George Tooker, and Jonathan Borofsky dominate. There are but sixteen Post-Impressionist, abstract, hard-edge, or Cubist works and a mere sixteen traditional images depicting healing from the Egyptians to the Renaissance. In contrast, we find twenty-five examples of folk and primitive art. The frontispiece is Otto Dix's specimen of the Weimar era's *Neue Sachlichkeit*: his portrait of a fat, smug doctor of the conventional kind. In keeping with our decade of "abject art," the great paintings of human healing and suffering, e.g., Hogarth's Bethesda murals, Eakins's *Agnew Clinic*, Gros's *Pesthouse at Jaffa*, Diego Rivera's cardiology mural—or even Motherwell's *Elegies*—are conspicuous by their absence.

The text has such minimal expectations of the reader that it refers to "a sociologist called Goffman" and an "Italian philosopher called Bruno." It offers no hint that medicine is (or ever was) a learned profession. The healers seem to have suffered from ski injuries but not from all-nighters with dead white European males: they refer mainly to each other's work and their own exercise rituals. The few poems and literary quotations that these New Agers offer reveal most of them to be wildly uncultivated. Occasionally they bend the knee to an elder such as Max Lerner or Norman Cousins. Mother Teresa comes up a lot.

So much for the form. What about the content: Are they right? Does the mind influence the body? Of course it does. This is not, however, great news for any of us. Doctors and patients alike have known since Hippocrates that we get ulcers when upset, break out in a sweat when afraid, get headaches when angry, and blush when embarrassed. Grief kills. The real question is whether these cause-and-effect relationships between mind and body require for their explanation the orphic insights of New Age meditation. One is forced to say—and to their credit many of Moyers's healers *do* say it—that the jury is still out. Were the FDA to have set hurdles for the approval of these unconventional medical practices as high as those now set for treatments of the conventional kind, the unconventional practices would fail to clear. All of these "treatments" are—at best—arrested at the level of what pharmacologists would call Phase II trials, i.e., they stop *before* they have been proved safe and effective by means of randomized, double-blind studies in humans.

The level of proof accepted by Moyers *et alii* can be judged from the following study in Los Angeles. Professional "method" actors were asked to mimic acutely happy or sad experiences and the psychoimmunologists counted blood cells (N-K cells) which they believe to constitute the first line of defense against disease:

> DOCTOR: Then, when the actor got into that state, we looked for changes in the immune system. For example, we asked each actor to imagine that he had been rejected for a part. He began to feel very intense sad feelings. We found that during the intense sad state there was an increase in the number of natural killer cells [N-K cells] in the actor's bloodstream, and that these killer cells were functioning more efficiently than they were when the actor was in a neutral state.
>
> MOYERS: So when the actor became sad, *something healthy happened* [italics added]. . . . [But, you also] studied each actor as he imagined he got the part and was a big success on opening night. He was exuberant. Did his state of joy have an impact on his immune system?
>
> DOCTOR: We found that the effect of the happy state on the immune system was very similar to what we had seen as a result of the sad state . . .
>
> MOYERS: What seems certain from your research is that short-term emotions do affect our immune system.

Actually, what seems certain to the uninitiated is that method acting affects the



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traffic of N-K cells. Besides, most card-carrying immunologists are not persuaded that N-K cells constitute the first line of defense against infection. That function is served by cells called neutrophils.

Nevertheless, if emotions *do* influence body functions, how do the New Age healers restore what one of them calls "right inward measure"? Moyers describes a stress reduction session at the University of Massachusetts in the course of which he underwent a "body scan," a procedure designed to promote self-awareness or—arousal:

> MOYERS: What exactly is happening during the body scan?
>
> THERAPIST: I don't know what's happening physiologically because we haven't wired up people and watched them go through this. But the chances are that they're learning how to relax and dwell in the present moment. In the body scan, you lie on the floor, and without moving begin by directing the focus of your attention to the toes of your left foot, and then, gradually, up through your leg, and over to the other toes, and the other leg, and eventually through the whole body. After forty-five minutes you're in a state of deep relaxation, and you have a sense of profound well-being.
>
> MOYERS: That actually happened to me both times that I experienced the body scan with you. The first time I'd been up all the previous night, and this morning I had flown ten hours the day before to get here, so I came to both sessions really dragging my body like a sack of potatoes. But something happened during the body scan. I don't know what to call it, because physically, I haven't really had that kind of experience before. *Perversely, during the sitting meditation, I got agitated, and I had to get up and leave* [italics added]. . . . The body scan worked for me, but the meditation didn't.

"Healers" would call Moyers's agitation a crisis, and Moyers explains to the therapist the reasons for his agitation:

> I thought the explanation for the difference I experienced was that you've got a good bedside manner, and during the body scan, your gentle, soothing voice was a friendly ally in my descent into the body. But in the sitting meditation, you withdrew, and left me sitting there by myself.

Well, one doesn't require training in dynamic psychiatry—or dialectical materialism—to figure out why a premature withdrawal by a "friendly ally" in a "descent into the body" might provoke a crisis in the best of us. Moyers describes the beginning of one of these sessions:

> They are your everyday, garden-variety Americans, twenty-five of them, and they are sitting in a circle on the floor, their legs tucked beneath them, or on folding chairs. Their eyes are closed. They are eating raisins. Three raisins each, one at a time.
>
> "S-l-o-w-l-y," says the man in the center. "Lift one raisin slowly to your mouth. Chew it v-e-r-y s-l-o-w-l-y." He pauses and surveys the circle. "Observe your arm lifting the raisin." Pause. "Think about how your hand is holding it." Pause. "Now put it in your mouth and think about how it feels there." Pause. "Savor it." Pause. "Notice any thoughts, either negative or positive, that you have about raisins." Pause. "Pay attention to your salivary glands." Pause. "Your jaws." Pause. "Your teeth." Pause. "Now notice your tongue as you slowly, s-l-o-w-l-y, swallow the raisin."

Now, some doctors might regard unconventional medical practices of this sort as harmless shenanigans while others might recommend them to patients suffering from functional complaints of bowel or back. But unconventional medicine is on the rise and clearly meets the needs of those who cannot gain comfort from pills or conventional medical advice alone. In a recent study, supported by the John E. Fetzer Institute and carried out by two of Moyers's interviewees, Drs. David Eisenberg and Thomas Delbanco, one in three respondents in a nationwide telephone survey reported using at least one unconventional therapy in the last year (acupuncture, chiropractic, herbal med-



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icine, spiritual healing, relaxation techniques, etc.). In fact, the estimated number of visits to unconventional medical providers (425 million a year) exceeded those to all U.S. primary care physicians (388 million). The estimated cost, $10.3 billion a year out of pocket, compares to $12.8 billion spent out of pocket annually for all hospitalization in the U.S.!

Bill Moyers's experience with the raisin eaters may be slightly absurd, but it is possible to argue that the whole mind/body movement has a darker precedent: a recurrent *fin-de-siècle* preoccupation with the supernatural that culminated in seventeenth-century witchcraft trials, eighteenth-century Mesmerism, and nineteenth-century psychical research.

Three hundred years ago, sightings of "great balls of fire," visions of "multitudes in white glittering robes," and the sensation of flying "out of body" were considered signs of possession, not of meditation. In consequence, over thirty women were convicted of witchcraft and put to death in Salem, Massachusetts, in an episode not unconnected to intense village factionalism. Had young Ann Putnam or poor Tituba confessed to the kind of out-of-body experience described by one of Moyers's healers ("riding the waves, much as if I were lying on a rubber raft on the ocean . . .") it would have been used as evidence for the prosecution. Accused and accuser shared the belief that magic ruled the body.

In 1868, James Russell Lowell wrote apropos the Salem witchcraft trials that

> credulity, as a mental and moral phenomenon, manifests itself in widely different ways, according as it chances to be the daughter of fancy or terror. The one lies warm about the heart as Folk-lore, fills moonlit dells with dancing fairies, sets out a meal for the Brownie . . . and makes friends with unseen powers as Good Folks; the other kind is a bird of night, whose shadow sends a chill among the roots of the hair: it sucks with the vampire, gorges with the ghoul and commits uncleanliness with the embodied Principle of Evil, giving up the fair realm of innocent belief to a murky throng from the slums and stews of the debauched brain.

And one hundred years ago, William James —quondam president of the Society for Psychical Research—defended its activities against the charges of "soft-headedness and idiotic credulity" by pointing out the obstinacy of the clairvoyant tradition over the ages which lay "broadcast over the surface of history. No matter where you open its pages," James wrote, "you find things recorded under the name of divinations, inspirations, demonical possessions, apparitions, trances, ecstasies, miraculous healings and productions of disease, and occult powers possessed by peculiar individuals."

James believed at the end of his century in what the New Age healers believe at the end of our own: that—in his words—"the thunderbolt has fallen and that the orthodox belief in reductionist science has not only had its presumptions weakened, but the truth itself . . . decisively overthrown." William James's father, Henry, Sr., was a devout follower of the Swedish mystic Emanuel Swedenborg. His massive tome *The Secret of Swedenborg* was reviewed by William Dean Howells with the quip that "he kept it." So it is in keeping with family tradition that William, the most gifted of American physician/writers, toyed with the mechanics of Swedenborgian automatism and somnambulism in his psychological laboratory.

But the real precursor of the New Age movement was Mesmerism. As we slouch toward the end of our millennium, we should not be surprised that the proliferation of crystal healers, clairvoyants, spiritual guides, homeopaths, gurus, ayurvedic practitioners, and herbalists is unmatched since the era of "animal magnetism." Franz Mesmer (1737–1815), the Austrian physician and hypnotist (alias somnambulist), became the most fashionable Svengali of pre-revolutionary Paris. Robert Darnton has ably demonstrated that Mesmerism effectively closed the book on the Age of Reason. In



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*Mesmerism and the End of the Enlightenment in France*, Darnton quotes an enthusiastic nobleman describing the prevalence of false prophets in pre-revolutionary France:

> Never, certainly, were Rosicrucians, alchemists, prophets, and everything related to them so numerous and so influential. Conversation turns almost entirely upon these matters; they fill everyone's thoughts; they strike everyone's imagination . . . Looking around us, we see only sorcerers, initiates, necromancers, and prophets. Everyone has his own, on whom he counts.

In our New Age of Unreason, we can count on our own amanuensis in narcissism. We will brook every compromise in the sphere of social justice, but not of coiffure. An item that appeared recently in the "Style" section of *The New York Times* describes services offered by a hair salon called "Nymph" in New York's SoHo district:

> In addition to cutting, coloring, perming and shampooing, Nymph offers some New Age extras. Clairvoyant counseling with Elaine Woodall ($75 for a one-hour session), astrological consultations with Shelly Ackerman ($65 an hour) and dream workshops with Ann Twitty (no charge) are available by appointment. The scalp massage, though, may be the most therapeutic of all the services.

The *élan vital* of Nymph and Moyers and the rest of the narcissistic mind/body movement is Mesmer's theory of fluid energy: animal magnetism. Mesmer preached that all disease resulted from various "obstacles" to the flow of a magnetic fluid or energetic force in the body. These obstacles could be overcome by massage or by prodding certain vital "poles" of the body: a body scan, so to speak. Mesmerists believed that when a "crisis" or "resistance" was induced, the symptoms would dissipate and the "harmony" of man with nature could be restored. The key to it all was an energetic fluid that united everything. Darnton describes a session:

> Sitting around the tubs in circles, the patients communicated the fluid to one another by means of a rope looped about them all by linking thumbs and index fingers in order to form a mesmeric "chain," something like an electric circuit . . . Soft music, played on wind instruments, a pianoforte, or the glass "harmonica" that Mesmer helped to introduce in France sent reinforced waves of fluid deep into [the patient's] soul. Every so often fellow patients collapsed, writhing on the floor, and were carried by Antoine, the mesmerist-valet, into the crisis room; and if his spine still failed to tingle, his hands to tremble, his hypochondria to quiver, Mesmer himself would approach, dressed in lilac taffeta robe, and drill fluid into the patient from his hands, his imperial eye, and his mesmerized wand.

In our century, Moyers's interviewees also seem to believe that "energy" and its focus by "mind" are the keys to healing. (In this and other quotations from Moyers, I've omitted actual names of interviewees to avoid causing them further embarrassment.)

> DOCTOR: Health is a dynamic energy flow that changes over a lifetime.
> SCIENTIST: The mind is some kind of enlivening energy in the information realm throughout the brain and body that enables the cells to talk to each other, and the outside to talk to the whole organism.
> DOCTOR 2: I think, ultimately, everything is a different form of energy. Even matter that seems solid as a rock is energy. We know from Einstein that energy and matter are interconvertible. Now, what I find interesting is that when you can focus energy, you gain more power, for better and for worse. . . . But we can use that same principle in a healing direction rather than in a harmful one by learning to concentrate mental energy.

In this Einsteinian context, I note that our local, trendy workout club in New York features a logo composed in equal parts of a Bohr-model atom and a yin/yang circle. Beneath it, on the T-shirts of the fit airheads that worship there, is stenciled the equation



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$E=MC^2$. When asked what that means, the workout waifs avow that "energy equals motivated conditioning." In Moyers's book, there are seven references to yin/yang theory, twenty-two to "energy," six references to "motivation," and two whole chapters devoted to "conditioning." William James had it right: the "traditions and practices of the occult" remain "everywhere on the surface of history" as alive as in the days of Mesmer or psychical research.

The *reductio ad absurdum* of such sentimental New Age fancies is the celebrity of Marianne Williamson. This guru of spiritual healing has written an "ook" entitled *A Return to Love* (twenty-nine weeks as a best seller) and has now hit the top of the "Advice, How-to and Miscellaneous" best-seller list with another called *A Woman's Worth*. Williamson, in *A Return to Love*, advised AIDS patients to write a letter to their disease as part of the "imaging" techniques so popular on the West Coast. She has counselled the deeply troubled spirits of Elizabeth Taylor, Oprah Winfrey, Judy Collins, and Mike Nichols. On a book tour in New York, she gave advice from her new book on spiritual healing, which contains such solid insights into anthropology as:

> Most women I know are priestesses and healers, although many don't yet know it, and some never will. We are all of us sisters of a mysterious order.
>
> It's a woman's prerogative to know of magic, and to practice magic, and to use her knowledge to help the world.
>
> Let's become more beautiful with age, attaining that stature of the Jungian Crone.

She also announced a novel aspect of unconventional medicine. Speaking to an audience that crowded Episode, a chic Madison Avenue clothing boutique, she allowed that "[t]here's something interesting about speaking in a clothing store. I love clothes and I understand the healing power of shopping." That form of alternative medicine should drive the health-care budget northward by a bundle!

Now all this would be simple fun and games were it not for more discouraging implications of New Age healing. Spurred on by proponents of homeopathy, meditation, and spiritualism in the Democratic Congress, the National Institutes of Health set up last fall an Office for the Study of Unconventional Medical Practices (SUMP) with an initial funding of $2 million per annum. The NIH called a conference to clarify the goals of this office (the SUMP pump?) and convened many of the same experts (*sic*) in the fields of ayurvedic, naturopathic, Chinese herbal, and homeopathic medicine who turned out to be the interviewees of Moyers's mini-series and tie-in book. This coven of experts went through the motions of proposing "multicentered, large-scale, definitive controlled trials of UMPs." They agreed that many of the unconventional methods have "associative belief systems" (twelve references in Moyers). Well, of course they do: the name for those belief systems is "religion," and I'm not sure that one wants NIH in the business of judging which religions work better than others in definitive, controlled trials.

As for those multicentered large-scale trials to be planned by the SUMP office, one might direct the ayurvedic folk to the morbidity and mortality tables of rural India, Africa, and China today, the church records of Salem of 1693, the life expectancy of Parisians in 1788, or the bills of mortality of Cambridge in 1891. Before scientific medicine interfered with traditional practices, few folks lived to be as old as the youngest U.S. senator currently serving the public. Nor can the sorry public-health statistics of our inner cities be attributed to inadequate access to folk remedies or group meditation. To paraphrase Lincoln Steffens: we have seen the future of SUMPs and they do not work. Meanwhile, in the most important aspect of medical practice—public health—young doctors are sweating over research grants that remain unfunded because an alliance of homeopaths and New Age toe-ticklers seem to have gotten hold of a dotty senator or two.



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Moyers and Williamson, the spiritual heirs of the Salem elders, of Anton Mesmer, and of Jamesian clairvoyance, should feel comfortable among the Hollywood stars they comfort and on the lists of ooks with Jungian myth-merchants. One fears, however—to revert to Lowell's phrase—that they may not only be setting out a meal for the Brownie but inviting vampires to suck. One of Moyers's New Age doctors points out that "healing" derives from the same root as "to make whole." Yes, it does, but my OED informs me that its ultimate origin is Old Teutonic and in German the noun is *Heil*, as in *Sieg Heil!* Another motto of National Socialism was *Blut und Boden*, which referred to natural, folk-based German customs based on blood's affinity with the earth, an alliance that the Nazis believed had been broken by "Western cosmopolitanism."

Natural medicine, based on principles of *Blut und Boden*, has had its own history of Phase II trials. According to R. F. Cornot in his book *Judgment at Nuremburg* (1983), Dr. Karl Gephardt, "supreme clinician" to the SS, told the Nuremburg tribunal that his leaders

> had little regard for scientific medicine, and they were all attracted by natural medicine. All sorts of popular drugs which were not approved by the medical profession . . . were used experimentally in concentration camps. The source of these experiments was Himmler's conception of medicine as pure mysticism.

Of course the politics of Moyers and the New Age healers are not those of the National Socialists, but once the restraints of reason are cut, you leave public life open to takeover by Lowell's murky throng from the slums and stews of the debauched brain.

The brownshirts also promoted early conditioning of the children of the earth on behalf of the fatherland, and I'm afraid that echoes of that creed can be detected in the hopes of a biofeedback enthusiast quoted by Moyers: "I think it would be wonderful if every child, beginning at age six or seven, could have an opportunity to be hooked up to a biofeedback system, maybe some sort of computer game that was cued to a physiologic response."

Much of the mind/body movement, or the workout and meditation culture, reminds one of the brownshirted *Kraft durch Freude* adventure with its aim of increasing collective bliss at the expense of social justice. Increase your bliss enough and you wind up with the Terror. The fashionable folk who gave you Mesmer also gave you the original eighteenth of Brumaire: a takeover by a short despot in love with the military. Barras, displaced on the eighteenth by Napoleon, asked: "when this moment arrives, and the secretly conducted workings of opinion have reached their terms, where are the human resources which will be able to oppose it?" One hopes that the Moyers's mélange—that millenarian psychobabble of biofeedback, Jungian magic, mysterious orders, and focused energy—is not a prelude to a new sinister episode in our history.

Moyers's book features on its cover a painting by Georgia O'Keeffe of a sea shell, a nautilus. Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes, dean of the Harvard Medical School, wrote for Lowell's *Atlantic* the definitive poem of rational evolution: "The Chambered Nautilus." He also gave a fitting response to the Mesmeric, unconventional medical practices of his day in an essay "Homeopathy and Kindred Delusions":

> As one humble member of [the medical] profession, which for more than two thousand years has devoted itself to the pursuit of the best earthly interests of mankind, always assailed and insulted from without by such as are ignorant of its infinite complexities and labors, always striving in unequal contest with [disease] not merely for itself but for the race and the future, I have lifted my voice against this lifeless delusion, rolling its shapeless bulk into the path of a noble science it is too weak to strike, or to injure.

Would that it were so, Dr. Holmes, would that it were so.



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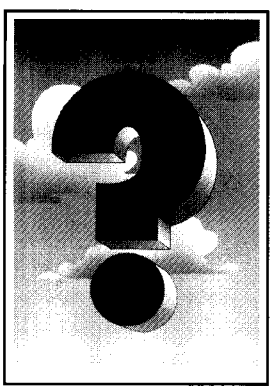

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